

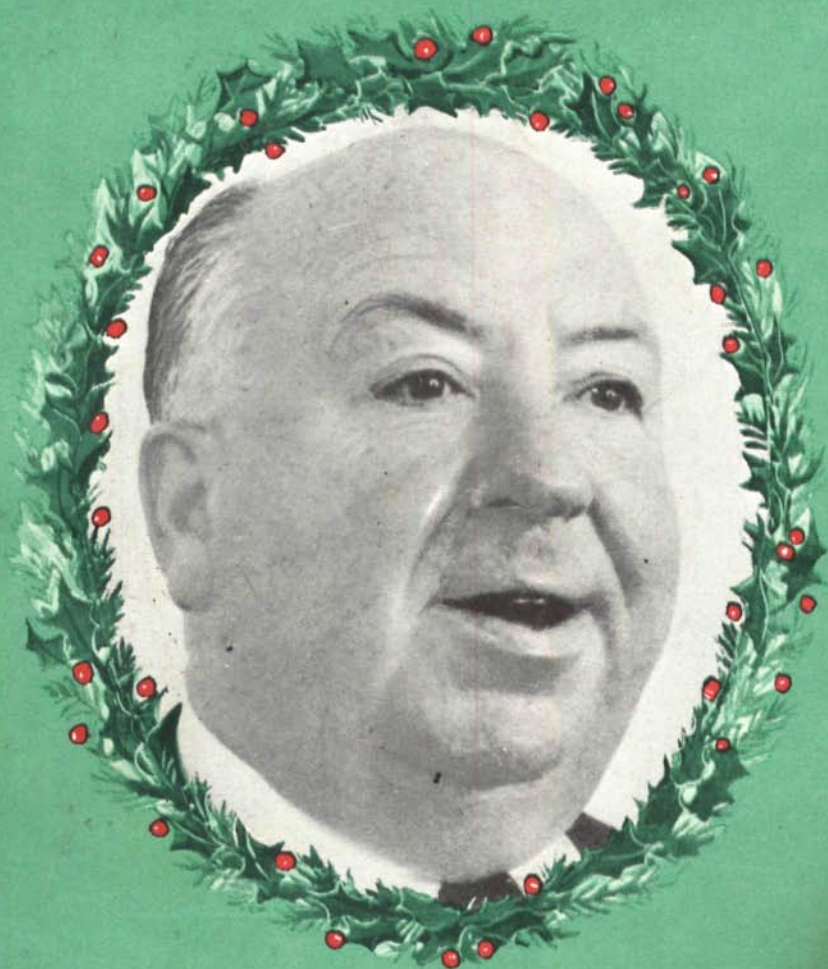
ALFRED

JANUARY 50¢

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

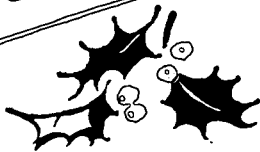
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Merry
Christmas
and Happy
New Year

alfred hitchcock



ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 13, No. 1, January 1968. Single copies 50 cents.
and Possessions; elsewhere \$7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc.,
2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302.
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- ONE DEADLY SIN *by Anthony Marsh* 138

SHORT STORIES

- THE RUNNING MAN *by Bill Pronzini* 2
- HIPSTER WITH A MESSAGE *by Austin Mattox* 18
- CHANGE FOR A DOLLAR *by Elijah Ellis* 25
- RAINY WEDNESDAY *by Thomasina Weber* 36
- FRINGE BENEFITS *by Edward Y. Breese* 44
- THE TOKEN *by Hal Ellson* 56
- A CHILD'S VOICE *by Lawrence A. Hayner* 62
- THE DEATH OF ME *by Margaret E. Brown* 76
- PRESSURE *by Roderick Wilkinson* 81
- THE BIGGEST TOMBSTONE *by Bob Foster* 94
- A NATURAL BORN VICTIM *by Wenzell Brown* 101
- DEAD, YOU KNOW *by John Lutz* 115
- THE KID'S RELIGION *by Jerry Jacobson* 120
- YEAR-END CLEARANCE *by Mary Linn Roby* 133

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The man who runs willy-nilly is seldom alerted for potholes in the road.

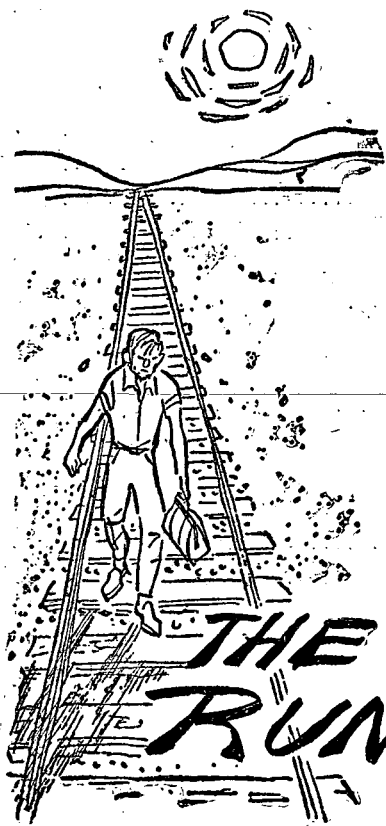


HE HAD been walking under the blinding desert sun for two hours, following the straight, solid line of the railroad tracks, when he saw, first, the highway, and then

the single building standing near it.

Having been put off the freight at a siding somewhere in the lower Arizona desert when he had been found hiding in a hot and dirty cattle car, he had wanted to rest in the shade of one of the buildings, but the man at the siding told him that the Sheriff would be called if he stayed around there, and that he had better move on if he didn't want to spend time in the county jail. He had asked for some water, because his mouth and throat were scorched from thirst, and he had been given a single cupful, nothing more. Then he had begun to walk.

He had no idea where he was, except that he was in the desert, but he knew if he followed the tracks they would eventually lead him to a town. It did not matter to him what town, not really, not



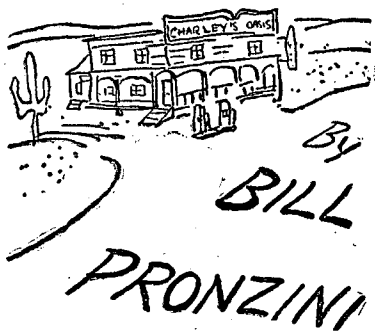
THE RUNNING MAN

anymore. They all looked alike.

Now, he paused on the raised bank of the tracks, staring at the highway and along it, some five hundred yards, to where he could see the single building. The highway came out of the west, diagonally toward the tracks, and then curved gradually to parallel them. The building, standing back from the highway, was almost equidistant between it and the tracks.

He ran his tongue over dry, cracked lips and looked up into the red ball of the sun. It had begun to sink now, slowly, moving down behind the long, thin, black ribbon of the highway.

He wondered about the build-



ing. More than likely a gas station, he decided. That meant they would have water, and rest rooms where he could wash the smell of the cattle car from his body and change out of the sweat-soaked clothing he wore.

Taking a firmer grip on the small overnight bag he carried, he went down the sloped bank and began to walk through the mesquite and scrub brush to the highway, hurrying a little now, and wondering if they had food there at the building. He felt the hunger in his stomach. How long had it been since he'd eaten? Last night—had it been almost twenty-four hours?

The highway was molten black glass, and he had to walk with his eyes cast downward to keep from being blinded by the sun-glare. The building, he saw as he approached it, was old and wooden, a single-story, unpainted affair, fronted by a small, packed-dirt parking lot and two weathered gas pumps. To the right of the main building, and slightly behind it, was a smaller, squat building.

As he reached the dusty, unpaved access road leading off the highway, he saw a faded sign, the black-lettered words dulled by the hot desert winds, which read: *Charley's Oasis*.

He went down the access road, smelling the dry dust and tasting it in his mouth. When he came to the dirt lot, he could see a screen door under a wooden awning, and two windows, one on either side of the door. In one of the windows was a soft drink sign; in the other

was a colorful beer advertisement.

A sign on the front of the squat building to the right pointed to *Rest Rooms*, and he went there first. Inside, he peered into the small mirror over the lavatory. He saw a man named Jack Hennessy, a man who was thirty-one years old, and who looked forty. He saw pain lines etched at the corners. He saw close-cropped black hair that had already begun to lighten at the temples, making him look older. *I don't know this face any more*, he thought.

He rubbed the beard stubble on his jaw. He hadn't shaved in two days. The desert sun had turned his skin a boiled pink color which looked incongruous against the blackness of the beard and the grime of the cattle car.

He wondered what Karen would say if she could see him like this. No. Not now. He didn't want to think about Karen.

He stripped off his sodden shirt and trousers and underwear. He turned on the tap and cupped his hands under the thin stream of water. He rinsed his mouth, resisting the urge to drink. The water tasted of chemicals. They would have fresh water inside.

From the overnight bag he took a thin bar of soap, washed his face and neck, then spilled water on the rest of his body. He took a

towel from the bag and dried himself, then put on a thin blue shirt and his only other pair of shorts and a pair of wrinkled denim trousers. Looking in the mirror again, he debated shaving.

Oh, hell, he thought, *I'm not dressing to go out to dinner with Karen. I'm not . . . Oh, why do I have to keep thinking about her? How long will it go on? Aren't you ever able to forget?*

He put his soiled clothes in the bag, wet his hair and ran a comb through it, then stepped out onto the deserted sun-baked lot and walked to the main building.

It was warm inside, an overt stuffiness. A large ceiling fan whirred overhead, and there was an ice-cooler on a table in the rear, but they did little to appease the heat. He paused to let his eyes grow accustomed to the change in light, then went to a long, deserted lunch counter along the right-hand wall. The remainder of the room was taken up with wooden tables covered with red checked oilcloth, all of them empty now, and straight-backed chairs. On the wooden walls around the room were hung prospecting tools—picks, shovels, nugget pans and the like. In the rear, next to an old-fashioned wood stove, was a rocking cradle like the ones prospectors used.

Behind the lunch counter was a young blonde girl in a white uniform. She appeared to be about eighteen, was very pretty in a young, scrubbed sort of way. Her cheeks had a rosy glow, and she wore no makeup. As Jack sat down on one of the stools, he noticed she had blue eyes. *Karen had blue eyes, too. Karen, Karen, Karen . . .*

"May I help you, sir?" the girl said.

"A glass of water, please."

She took a large glass and filled it from a fountain tap. He tasted it—ice cold. Then drank thirstily, spilling some on his clean shirt, aware the girl was watching him.

"Would you like some more?" she asked.

"Yes, please." He drank another glass.

"I saw you come up," the girl said, indicating the window to the right of the door. "You weren't walking in that sun, were you?"

"My car broke down," he said, and then wondered why he had lied.

"We haven't got a mechanic here," she said.

"No, it's all right," Jack said. "I'm expecting a friend."

Another lie. Why? Why am I lying to this young girl?

"Would you care for something to eat?"

"Yes, all right. Something . . ."

She gave him a single card with the menu printed on it: *Ham-burger, 50¢ Cheeseburger, 60¢ Grilled Ham and . . .* He put the card down and passed a hand across his face.

"Is something the matter, sir?" the girl asked.

"No, nothing."

"Have you decided?"

"Some eggs," he said. "Just some scrambled eggs and toast."

"Something cold to drink?"

"No," he said. "Coffee."

The girl turned to a square opening in the wall, said, "Poppa."

An old man with bright gray eyes and a long, thin nose, dressed in a white shirt and apron, appeared in the opening. "Two, scrambled," the girl said, and the old man nodded. The girl took a cup from a stack on the back-counter, poured coffee into it from a glass pot on a two-burner there, and set the cup in front of Jack.

"You're not from around here, are you?" she said. "Back East someplace, I'll bet. I can tell by your accent. New York?"

"Boston," he said.

Still another lie. They seemed to flow from his lips without conscious thought. He did not know how many lies he had told in the past four months. He did not even know what reason he had

for lying; not self-deception surely. "Going to California?" the girl asked.

"Why do you ask that?"

"It seems like everybody is going to California these days," she said, and laughed.

"I'm going to Los Angeles."

"I was there once," the girl said. "It's awfully big. We're from Yuma."

"Is that near here?"

"About forty miles."

"Is that where the highway out there leads?"

"Yes, eventually." The girl smiled at him. "I'll be right back," she said. "I have to chip up some fresh ice."

After she left, Jack took out his wallet and looked inside—two dollars. He looked in the coin pocket—a little more than a dollar in change.

That was the last of it. Nothing left, then. Karen would be frantic if she knew he did not have any money. The idea pleased him, but then she was undoubtedly frantic as it was.

He wondered if she had the police looking for him.

Of course she would have the police looking for him. It was four months since he had left. She might even have private detectives looking for him, too. She would do that, all right. She would

do anything to get what she wanted. There was no doubt about that, not any longer. How could he have lived and slept and eaten and laughed and talked with somebody for three long years and not have any idea what she is really like. How is that possible?

The girl came back behind the counter carrying a pan full of ice which she dumped into a cooler filled with beer and soft drinks.

"The ice melts awfully fast in this heat," she told him. "You have to keep putting in fresh to keep things cold."

He nodded and lifted his cup. He sipped some of the coffee, and burned his tongue.

"Careful," the girl said. "It's very hot."

"Yes," he said, and drank some ice water.

He wondered suddenly why he was running. The thought came out of nowhere, flashing into his mind, and he frowned. Well, that was stupid. It was very simple why he was running. He was running because he refused to work ten hours a day drafting engineering designs to pay for his selfish wife's extravagance. He was running because there was a pain down deep inside him, the pain of a shattered dream, and he wanted to forget that pain and the cause of that pain. He was running because he

had been stripped of his pride, and left with nothing. He was running because . . .

Why am I running? And where am I running to? He sat rigidly erect, with the coffee cup held halfway to his mouth. *Come on, that's enough now. You thought it all out once, didn't you? You decided this was the only way, didn't you? Come on, now. Come on, you . . .*

He brought the cup clattering to the counter, spilling coffee. He felt himself sweating. *It must have been the sun. Yes, that was it.*

"Are you sure you're all right?" the girl asked. She had been watching him curiously.

"Fine," he said. "I was just walking too long in the sun."

"Do you want some aspirin?"

"No, I'm fine now."

"Two, scrambled," the old man said from the kitchen.

The girl took the plate of eggs and a plate of toast from the sill and set them in front of Jack. He picked up his fork. He had an urge to lift the plate of eggs and scrape them into his mouth, but he forced himself to eat slowly, taking alternate bites of egg and toast, and then little sips of coffee. The girl watched him eat, not speaking.

He heard the car then, and turned slightly on his stool. Look-

ing out one of the windows, he saw a dusty, dark green station wagon coming down the access road. It turned onto the lot and parked next to the building. Two men got out.

Jack could see that they were average-sized, dressed in sports shirts and slacks, and both wearing cotton jackets. In this heat? One had black hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. The other was blond, had a wide forehead and a cupid's bow mouth. Jack turned back to his eggs, but looked up again briefly when the door opened and the two men came inside. They stood just inside the door, as he had, to let the glare of the sun fade from their eyes. Then they went to one of the oilcloth-covered tables and sat down.

"Damn, it's hot," one of the men said, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"A scorcher," the other man agreed.

The girl came around the counter and went to them, asked, "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Two beers, and I hope they're cold."

"Yes, sir," the girl said. "Ice cold."

"And bring a menu, will you?"

Jack finished his eggs, then spread jam thickly on his last piece of toast.

The girl took two beers from the cooler, opened them, put them on a tray with two of the menu cards and took them to the table where the two men were sitting.

They studied the menus. "What does the house recommend?" one of them asked.

"The ribs. They're charcoal-broiled, with our own special sauce."

"What do you say, Frank?"

"Sure, two orders of ribs. And bring two more beers."

"Yes, sir."

The girl came back and called the order into the kitchen where the old man was fanning himself with a newspaper. Jack said, "Miss, I'd like another cup of coffee, please."

"Certainly." She poured Jack another cup, and filled his water glass again.

He sipped his coffee, looking out the window and up to the shimmering asphalt highway. He wondered if he could get a ride. There didn't seem to be many cars on the road.

The girl opened another two bottles of beer and took them to the two men.

"Are you gentlemen going to California?" she asked.

"Are we going to California, Frank?"

"No," Frank said. "We're not

going to California." He laughed.

"Are you salesmen?"

"Do we look like salesmen?"

"Well, we have a lot of salesmen stopping here."

"We're not salesmen," Frank said.

"We're hunters," the other man said, smiling.

"Oh, then you're going to Nevada. They say there's good hunting in Nevada."

"No, we're not going to Nevada," Frank said. "There's some good hunting right here."

The girl laughed. "No, you're wrong there. Unless you want to hunt jackrabbits. That's all we have around here."

"You're wrong there, missy."

"Ribs are ready," the old man called from the kitchen.

"Excuse me," the girl said to the men, and came around behind the counter to pick up the ribs.

Jack looked at his watch. It was after five o'clock. Maybe he could pick up a ride into the nearest town before it got to be too late; or maybe into Yuma. He would have to get a room for the night, and then in the morning he would have to find a job. Washing dishes was about all he could get, coming into a strange town. He'd washed a lot of dishes in the past four months.

He glanced at the tab the girl

had put in front of him—fifty-seven cents. He found two quarters, a nickel and two pennies in the coin pocket of his wallet and put them on top of the tab. Then he stood, picked up his bag, and looked toward the two men.

He might be able to get a ride with them, but they had said they were hunters, were probably going into the mountains someplace.

Deciding he would try to catch a ride on the highway, he walked to the door.

"Hey, fellow, where you going in such a hurry?" one of the men sitting at the table asked.

Turning, Jack said, "I'm leaving."

"Why don't you sit down and have another cup of coffee?" the man invited.

"I don't want another cup of coffee."

"I think you better have one."

"Oh, hell," Jack said. Maybe they were drunk. He was glad he hadn't asked them for a ride. He turned for the door.

He had taken two steps when he heard the girl's muffled gasp behind him, and he came around again. Both of the men were standing, and each of them held a gun which they had taken from beneath their jackets.

Jack, staring at them, felt a cold knot in his stomach. "Hey," he

said. "Hey, what is this? What's—"

"Sit down there," one of the men said, motioning with his gun.

"What kind of joke is this?"

"It's no joke. Sit down."

Jack sat down. Those were real guns. What was going on?

He saw the girl standing behind the counter, with one hand pressed to her mouth and her eyes wide like blue marbles. She stood absolutely motionless, as if she had been hypnotized.

Frank, the one with the black hair and mustache, said, "You, old man, come out here."

The old man stood behind the opening into the kitchen, but he did not move. He was frozen, like the girl.

"Didn't you hear me, old man?"

The old man moved then. He came around through the swing doors at the far end of the diner and stood next to the girl.

"There anybody else here?" Frank asked. "Dishwasher or a man on the pumps?"

"No."

"All right. Both of you come around and sit down next to your friend there."

The old man took the girl's arm and led her around to where Jack was sitting, and both of them sat down.

"Now," Frank said, "that's fine."

"What is this?" the old man



asked loudly. "Is it a holdup?"

The two men laughed, and the blond one, Earl, said, "So you think it's a holdup?"

"We don't have any money," the

old man said. "There's only twenty dollars in the register."

"Take it easy," Frank told him.

"We don't want your money."

"What do you want then?"

"Just be quiet and you won't get hurt."

The girl, sitting next to Jack, began to cry. Instinctively, Jack put his arm around her, and she leaned against him, crying against his shoulder.

"That's nice," Frank said. "You take care of her."

Jack felt a sudden anger. "What the hell's the matter with you? What did you want to pull those guns for?"

"Maybe we like to pull guns," Earl said. "Maybe we do it all the time."

"You've got no right to scare people like this."

"If you don't shut up, I'm going to do more than scare you," Frank warned.

"What do you want here?" the old man asked.

"All right. So you want to know, do you? Earl, you tell him what we want here."

"We're here to kill a man."

"What!" Jack exploded.

"You heard me."

"You're crazy," the old man said, staring at them.

"We're not crazy," Frank denied.

"Who are you going to kill?"

"Maybe you," Earl said, and laughed.

"Shut up, Earl," Frank ordered.

"What do you mean by that?" the old man said.

"We're going to kill a man named Spikes," Earl told him.

"There's no one around here named Spikes."

"There will be."

"You're crazy," the old man said again.

"What time is it?" Frank asked Earl.

Earl looked at his watch, said, "Five-ten."

"Twenty minutes," Frank said.

"What happens in twenty minutes?" Jack asked.

"The train comes through."

"It's a freight," the old man said. "It doesn't stop anywhere around here."

"We know that," Earl said.

"Is the man you're going to kill on the five-thirty freight?"

"He'd better be."

"But it doesn't stop."

"It doesn't have to stop."

"The hell with all this," Frank said. "At five-thirty that freight is coming through here. There's a man named Spikes hiding in one of the boxcars, and when it passes by here he's going to jump off. Then he's going to come right here, because he thinks there's going to be a car waiting here for him, and a friend who's going to drive him to Mexico. But there isn't going to be any car and there isn't going to be any friend."

"Just us," Earl said.

"That's right, old man, just us."

"And you're going to kill him?"

"That's right, we're going to kill him."

"But why?"

"Let's just say he did something he shouldn't have done," Frank said.

No, Jack thought. No, this is silly. This can't be happening. Things like this don't happen any more.

He felt the girl's body shaking beneath his arm. He looked at the two men, standing there very casually, holding the guns, and he felt the sweat, hot and slick, on his back and under his arms. It was very hot in the diner. A shaft of sunlight from the sinking red ball outside the window was splashed on the wooden floor, and dust motes danced inside. Jack's throat was parched.

It was very quiet. The only sounds were the whirring of the overhead fan, and the girl's crying.

Finally, Earl said, "I'm going to finish my ribs."

"All right," Frank said. "You go ahead."

Earl sat down and began to eat, noisily, smacking his lips.

"What are you going to do to us?" the old man asked. He was sitting stiffly, his back arched into a straight line, but he did not seem afraid.

"Nothing," Frank told him. "If you keep quiet and do just what we tell you, we're not going to do anything to you."

Jack knew he was lying. They're going to kill us, he thought. After they kill this other man, this Spikes, then they're going to kill us, too. Or maybe they'll just tie us up and leave us in the kitchen. But we can identify them. No, no, they're going to kill us.

Then, for the first time since the men had taken out their guns, Jack began to feel fear.

Earl finished eating, and Frank was glancing around the room, his eyes moving slowly.

"What's back there?" he asked the old man, indicating the door at the rear of the diner.

"The storeroom."

"Is there a window in there?"

"Yes," the old man nodded.

"Earl, you go back there and watch for the train," Frank ordered. "Leave the door open so you can see in here." Earl drank the rest of his beer then went into the storeroom, leaving the door open. Jack could see him standing beside the window, peering out at the desert. Through the window, in the distance, he could see the raised mound that was the railroad tracks.

They waited five minutes, ten, in silence. It seemed to grow hotter

in the diner, as if all the desert heat had concentrated somehow inside the building. Jack was sweating freely now. Droplets of water rolled from his forehead down across his cheeks and fell on his shirt. His arm seemed to have gone to sleep around the girl's shoulders, but he made no move to take it away.

He felt protective somehow. Like a father with his daughter, that was how he felt. Yes, like a father to the child he'd wanted but never had. *Later*, Karen had said. *When we can afford it. Later, darling.*

Much, much later . . .

"Here comes the train," Earl called from the storeroom.

Jack could see the freight passing on the tracks outside; a long string of boxcars, a string of empty flats, two tankers, then a group of cattle cars and another set of boxes. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

"Do you see him?" Frank called to Earl.

"No, not yet."

"Maybe he jumped on the other side."

The freight sped past.

"There he is!" Earl called, and Jack saw him then, standing in the half-open doorway of one of the box cars near the end of the freight. He stood poised there for

a moment, and then he jumped. He hit the sand at the side of the tracks, rolling, and then got to his feet slowly and stood there, brushing sand and dust from his clothing. The man looked in the direction of the building, then began to run toward them.

Earl came back inside the diner. "He'll come around to the parking lot, looking for the car," Frank said. "When he doesn't see it, he'll figure it's late. He'll have to come inside then. He can't stand out there in the sun."

Earl nodded, and moved to the window by the door, looking out.

"All right," Frank said, "the three of you come around and stand behind the counter. We don't want you catching any stray bullets, do we?"

The old man immediately went around behind the counter. Jack helped the girl up and around to where the old man stood.

"You just stand there and keep quiet," Frank said to them. "Don't move at all and don't make a sound, you understand?"

Jack realized the full impact of what was about to happen then. *They are going to kill a man. Oh, God, we are going to stand here and watch them murder a man and there is nothing we can do about it.*

"Put your head against my

shoulder," Jack whispered to the girl. "Don't look at this."

"Shut up, you," Frank said, moving the gun.

Jack looked at him and clamped his teeth tightly together. As he brought his eyes back, he glanced at the old man. He was standing just to the side of the two-burner, and his hand was resting on the back counter. Jack saw the old man wet his lips, looking first to where Frank was and then down to where the glass coffee pot sat on the two-burner.

Jack knew instantly what the old man was thinking, and he felt a surge of hope. But just as quickly, the hope died. No, it was crazy. It wouldn't work. There were two of them, and Earl was on the other side of the room, at the window. How could he—

The old man caught Jack's gaze then, and he moved his head slightly, rolling his eyes. Jack, realizing he was trying to tell him something, followed the old man's eyes. He was looking at the cash register. No, no, he was looking to a small shelf beneath it, built into the counter; but there was nothing on the shelf except two empty mason jars, a cigar box that held cash register receipts, a roll of shelf paper, some rags . . .

He saw the gun, then.

He saw the gun, and his heart

gave a throbbing leap, moving up into his throat. It was wrapped in the rags on the shelf, so that only the tip of the barrel showed.

He kept looking at the gun, feeling slight weakness in his legs, and listening to the pounding of his heart. Then, realizing that Frank might be watching him, he tore his eyes away, looking up quickly.

Frank was staring at the window, to where Earl stood peering out.

Jack looked back to the old man, and saw the pleading question in the old man's eyes. Would he try it? Would he take the gamble? It was Jack's choice. Neither of them could do it alone; but together they might be able to pull it off. Jack was nearer the gun, and the old man couldn't get to it without stepping around both Jack and the girl. There was not enough time for that, not for him to do both. It had to be the two of them, or nothing.

He didn't know if he could do it. He hadn't fired a gun since the Army. Ten years—he didn't know if he could shoot a man. He didn't know if he could . . .

He felt the pressure of the girl's fingers on his arm. He looked down at her. They would kill her, too; just a young girl, not even out of her teens—

He made up his mind, suddenly. He met the old man's eyes, and the message passed between them silently, a mute understanding, and then they both looked away. "I see him," Earl said from the window.

"Where is he?"

"Over by the rest rooms. He sees the wagon."

"He knows that's not the car."

"He's just standing there."

"Give him time."

"He doesn't know what to do."

"He'll come inside," Frank said.

"He doesn't have any choice."

"Wait," Earl said. "Here he comes."

Jack tensed the muscles in his back, standing stiffly. He made his mind a complete blank. He did not trust himself to think.

"He's coming to the door," Earl said softly, and backed away from the window, into the center of the room.

"Get set," Frank whispered.

The front door of the diner opened.

Everything that happened then seemed to happen simultaneously, jammed into a single, frozen second, so that when that second ended it was all over.

When Jack saw the front door starting to swing open, he yelled, breaking the heat-shrouded silence that hung in the room: "Look out,

they've got guns! Don't come in!"

Immediately, the old man, his hand sweeping upward from the counter to the two-burner, and then outward in a single motion, threw the pot of hot coffee at Frank.

The pot struck him on the right shoulder, splashing the scalding liquid over his face and neck. He screamed, dropping his gun, his hands flying to his face.

Earl, on the opposite side of the room, fired a shot at the man in the doorway at the exact moment Frank screamed, but the sound of the scream jerked his arm and sent the shot thudding into the wall. The man in the doorway threw himself to the floor, tried to scuttle back outside on his hands and knees.

When the old man threw the pot of coffee, Jack had moved fast. He had jumped forward, with his warning yell and the sound of the gunshot ringing in his ears, and snatched the gun out of the rags, his finger automatically sliding off the safety the way he had been taught in the Army, and he brought the gun up in his right hand just as Earl swung around to the counter.

I'm going to kill a man, Jack thought, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet caught Earl high in the right shoulder. He staggered

backward with the impact, his own gun flying from his hand, and toppled over one of the wooden tables, his head cracking the solid wood floor. He lay very still.

Jack swung the gun, then, toward Frank, but he had fallen to the floor, his hands covering his scalded face. He was moaning. Jack lowered the gun.

The old man ran around to the front of the counter and picked up Frank's gun, holding it in both hands. The man from the train was still on the floor, half in and half out of the doorway, on his hands and knees. His face was the color of paste.

"They were going to kill you," the old man said to him. "They were going to kill you as soon as you walked in the door."

"Oh, my God," the man said. "Oh, my God."

The girl was crying hysterically. Jack looked down at the gun in his hand. It slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. His hands began to shake.

"I killed a man," he said.

The old man, standing above where Earl lay on the floor, said, "No, he's not dead. But he's out for a while."

"Get a doctor," Frank screamed from the floor. "Oh, get a doctor. My face is on fire."

Jack looked at him, and then at the girl. She was rocking on her feet, hugging herself. He went over to her. "Come on," he said. "Come on, it's all right. It's all over now."

At the sound of his voice, she stopped crying and looked up at him. Her eyes said everything.

The old man was still holding Frank's gun with both hands. "Mandy," he said to the girl, "call the sheriff."

"Yes, Poppa," she said, and went to the phone on the rear wall.

The man in the doorway had scrambled to his feet. Then he turned and began to run.

"Hey!" the old man yelled. "Hey, you, come back here!"

The man, ignoring him, kept running toward the highway.

"What's the matter with him?" the old man complained.

"He's running away from something," Jack said. "He doesn't want to be here when the sheriff comes."

He's running away, Jack thought. *Yes, he's running away.*

He went to the door and stood there watching the man running up the dirt road.

That's me running, he thought with a sudden realization, and he wiped a hand across his eyes. *That's me running up there. Running away, running, running.*

We are very much alike, that

man and me. Aren't we both frightened of what is behind us, and just as frightened of what lies ahead?

But I'm the lucky one. Oh, yes, I am the lucky one because I don't have to run. I never had to run at all. I thought I was hurting Karen, but in reality the only person I had been hurting was myself.

Jack felt then as if a great and heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders and from his mind. He felt a certain peace that he had not known for a long, long while, because on this single day, with all that had happened on this single day, he had learned more about himself than he had known in all his previous thirty-one years.

Turning from the doorway, he looked at the still figure of Earl lying on the floor, and at Frank holding his face in his hands and moaning. He looked at the girl just hanging up the telephone on the rear wall, and he looked at the old man, standing very straight and tall with the gun held in both hands.

The girl came to him and

touched his arm, briefly, timidly.

The old man said simply, "Thanks, son."

Jack nodded slowly. There was nothing more to be said.

The sheriff arrived twenty minutes later with two deputies and an ambulance. After the two men were loaded into the ambulance, the sheriff asked the questions he was bound to ask and when he had finished, he tipped his hat and went outside to his car.

Jack picked up his bag, and solemnly shook hands with the old man. The girl kissed him on the cheek, like a daughter would kiss her father, and he smiled at her. Then he went outside to where the sheriff was just starting his car.

"Can you give me a lift?" Jack asked.

"Be glad to," the sheriff said. "Where you going?"

"Home," Jack said. "I'm going home."

"Home?"

"Because I don't have to run, you see."

The sheriff just smiled, because he did not understand.



A hipster trend may be in the offing: most important messages are to be conveyed with mouth closed.

SHANTY O'CONNOR perched high on the ladder in the library at the far end of the row of mystery and adventure books that encompassed authors *Mo* through *Re*. He held

a small, dog-eared red volume in his left hand. His right hand passed around a rung and rested lightly at the upper corner of the book, ready to flip the page when his squinty bespectacled old eyes reached the bottom of it. His balance on the ladder was precarious but indifferent, an attitude achieved after countless hours of such reading, hours snatched between the trips he had made thousands of times to and from the library stacks, up and down the ladder, endless hours devoted to the world of mystery stories, fiction and nonfiction, of which he very likely had read more than any man living or dead.

On the ladder his wizened little body resembled that of a spider monkey. His white hair hung over his forehead like a wig that had



WITH
A MESSAGE

by Austin
Mattox

slipped. As he read, his lips moved, not in pursuit of the printed words but in concert with the excitement he derived from the story. He emitted little squeaks and snorts of admiration or dismay as his mind raced ahead of the author's narrative.

I hated to interrupt his concentration. I was also reluctant to start the business about which I had come to see him. Fond of that old man as I was, it was still embarrassing for me, a federal intelligence agent, to ask him, an amateur, for help. I waited a moment longer, thinking he might look up between pages.

It was Friday morning and the library was quiet. Only two other persons were present. They sat across the hall in the periodicals reading room. The main desk was untended.

"Ahem." My voice obtruded into the crypt-like silence. "Shanty," I called softly.

The old man looked down at me. His face seemed to crack apart as deep creases suddenly formed across it. "Ah, and it's Markus Lawrence, as I live and breathe!" He adjusted his spectacles. "What in the name o' good fortune would be bringin' ye here, Markus, me boy?" Before I could answer, he danced down the ladder like a boy shinnying down an apple tree. He

bounced excitedly in front of me and grabbed my hand. "Now y'don't have one o' yer wee puzzlers fer me by any chance, have ye?"

I nodded. "Do you have a place where we can talk?"

"Aye. O' course I do. Don't I always?" He pushed me toward the office behind the main desk. "There's no one t'hear ye in there, Markus."

His office was filled with the paraphernalia of the librarian: boxes of file cards, stacks of books, publishers' catalogs and notices, binding material for book repairing, scissors, a paste pot, framed documents, a huge dictionary and, in front of the single small window, a potted plant. I sat in a hard, straight-backed chair. Shanty sat facing me with hands clasped and both elbows on his desk. He was eager to hear what I had to offer, but I stalled, still a little embarrassed, and asked what he had been reading.

"'Tis but a volume of Poe," he said, glancing at the book he had dropped on the desk.

"Isn't that somewhat antique for you?"

"Ah," he said and he shook his finger at me. "A man must be returnin' to the well occasionally. Now quit yer procrastinatin' ways and tell me why ye came."

I plunged in. "Have you ever heard of a singer called Shaky Willspeare?"

He winced. "What an unconscionable corruption of a worthy name! I almost wish ye had not mentioned it."

"He is an internationally known entertainer, Shanty. He sings the modern song and plays guitar."

"Aye, the *non*-music, I'll wager. The electric guitar? The pelvic gyrations, too? The flowing mane?"

I nodded. That was Shaky Willspeare, all right.

"The thing that is disturbin' me most about those long-haired males," Shanty declared, "is that they don't take proper care o' their locks. Lasses are taught t'clean and brush their tresses, t'be sure, but these lads today—" He sighed. "The saints fergive me. I didn't mean t'interrupt with a lecture. Tell me about this . . . this hipster."

"The night before last, Shaky returned from a cultural exchange visit behind the Iron Curtain. While he was there—Monday evening, to be precise—he made contact with a person we've been trying for months to deal with."

"And who would that be?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you that."

"Can't tell me?"

"My superiors can let me bend

the rules only so far, Shanty. They don't know you the way I do. They appreciate the help you've given us in the past, but even so, security regulations must be observed to some degree. I have to draw the line somewhere."

"T'be sure," the old man petulantly agreed.

"You know I'd trust you with my life, Shanty. I probably wouldn't even be in this business if it weren't for your influence on me when I was a kid. Always reading me those mystery yarns and — You know, I still have the set of Sherlock Holmes books you gave me for my tenth birthday."

"Aye. I gave ye Holmes, did I? He was a fair sleuth fer an Englishman. Now, let's be hearin' yer tale, Markus. I'll be acceptin' the restrictions y'put on it."

"All right. I don't think the name of the contact is that important anyway. Let me call him *Ivan*. I can tell you this much about him. He is an inventive genius in covert communications."

"A wire tapper, eh?"

"Among other things. We believe he routinely bugs high level meetings for certain prominent members of the Party, so they can monitor their subordinates. This gives him access to mountains of top secret information. He is also a leader in miniaturization."

"I see, and if he has developed some startlin' new device or equipment or the like, you'd be wantin' t'know about it." Shanty paused, then asked, "But what would this be havin' t'do with Mr. Shaky Willspeare?"

"Our ability to reach Ivan has been extremely poor. He is almost always surrounded by guards or co-workers. About two months ago one of our operatives managed to contact him, though, and he found Ivan amenable to the idea of aiding us. We think that Tuesday Ivan got in touch with our man again."

"Ye *think*?"

"Our man was shot before he could get a report back to us. He reached the embassy, however, and uttered one word before he died."

"How very melodramatic!" Shanty exclaimed. "Pray, what would the word have been?"

"*Willspeare*."

"Ah, I see."

"We didn't know what the connection was, of course, but we checked and found that Willspeare was over there with a cultural troupe. So we went to him and tried to find out what it all meant. Willspeare was of very little help."

"Somehow I would have expected that," Shanty said wryly.

"But upon interrogation, we learned that Ivan had visited him."

Shanty's white eyebrows went up. "Interestin'."

"It seems that Willspeare had been alone in his hotel room Monday evening—the night before our agent was killed—when a man came to the door. According to Willspeare's description, it must have been Ivan. On the pretext of wanting to check the plumbing, the man entered. He was alone so far as Willspeare knows. Without warning, Ivan knocked Willspeare out, and when Willspeare came to, he was gone. Willspeare wasn't sure, but he thought perhaps his shaving and toilet articles had been rifled. Nothing seemed to be missing, and not wanting to get involved with the authorities, Willspeare had not reported the incident. We haven't had any further communication from Ivan. We don't even know if he's still alive."

"But y'did get Willspeare back t'the U.S.A., y'say?"

"Yes. At our request, the State Department brought him out immediately."

"But y'have learned nothin', I take it. Y'found no message from Mr. Ivan? No little miniature device? Nothin' atall atall?"

"That's right. We have lost a good operator, lost contact with Ivan, and can't wring a clue from Willspeare. We think Ivan must have planted information with

Willspeare and then notified our agent to watch for it. Why else would he have gone to Willspeare? But our agent was killed, so we don't know what Ivan did or why. I've been on this affair without sleep for nearly thirty hours. I'm about ready to give up the whole thing unless you can suggest something helpful."

"Ye searched Willspeare, I assume."

"You'd better believe we searched him, Shanty! We spent all day yesterday taking his things apart piece by piece, his clothing almost thread by thread. We checked his guitar, and we really studied those toilet articles that he thought Ivan might have done something to."

"That wasn't necessary," Shanty said. "If there is a clue t'be found, it will be on himself most likely, not in his clothes. Mr. Ivan wouldn't count on Willspeare's effects bein' allowed t'leave the country."

Shanty's response excited me. I could see that he was already checking off possibilities like a computer. "You think there may be a clue? A message or something? We've searched his person thoroughly, too. Fluoroscopy. Endoscopy. No tattoos or marks on the body. No message written on his scalp. We covered every inch of

his skin with magnifying glasses."

"Did ye look fer—" Shanty cut himself off. "Ah, I wish I could be gettin' a look at the fellow me-self."

I stood up and pushed back the chair. "I thought you might want to meet him. He just happens to be outside in the car with my partner."

A few minutes later, my partner and Shaky Willspeare were in Shanty's office with us. Shaky looked skinny in his tight white jeans. He was of medium height, but he towered over the old man. His hair hung below the level of his shoulders. He was chewing gum, and it snapped when he talked. "Hi, Pops."

Shanty shook his head in dismay. "A singer, y'say? Incredible!"

"Yeah, Pops. I sing old seventeenth century ballads. Like Elizabethan, you know? That was when William Shakespeare was alive."

"I know." Shanty shuddered. "I know." He scratched his chin and wearily pushed his spectacles up on his nose. Circling Willspeare slowly, he inspected the youth. Willspeare watched the old man warily. After several minutes of silence, Shanty asked, "D'ye ever brush that mop, lad?"

Shaky stepped back disdainfully. "My hair symbolizes my natural

unfettered self, my individuality, my virility! You wouldn't want me to look girlish, would you?"

Shanty declined to comment and continued his inspection. I had the feeling he was doing more thinking than looking. Finally he turned to me, and his face crinkled in a satisfied smile. "It's not at all unlike Mr. Edgar Allan Poe's *Purloined Letter*, Markus. I believe yer Mr. Ivan left his message right in plain sight."

"What do you mean? Is there something?"

"It's that dark in here me old eyes cannot be certain, but I think I know how yer mysterious Mr. Ivan tried t'contact ye."

"What is it? How?"

Shanty held up his hand. "Now don't be impatient, me boy," he admonished. "Let's first be decidin' just what is possible. Mr. Ivan apparently felt he couldn't safely be givin' the information t'yer agent. The fact that yer agent was killed proves he was right in that assumption. So he had t'find another vehicle, another person, that is, t'get his information through the Curtain. His information and his *invention*." Shanty ignored me when I tried again to interrupt. "He had no contacts with other Westerners, y'said, so the whole trick in solvin' this riddle appears t'be t'figure out why he chose

Shaky Willspeare. There'd be three good reasons fer the choice. First, Mr. Ivan would most likely be aware of Willspeare because of the lad's most conspicuous feature, his ridiculous long hair. Why should that attract Mr. Ivan? After y'had told me his profession, the answer suggested itself.

"Second, he could be reasonably sure the other side would be lettin' Willspeare return through the Curtain alive, him bein' an international celebrity and all. Even if they suspected that he possessed a secret, they wouldn't be wantin' t'kill him and stir up a ruckus."

At that point I had to butt in. "But what is it? What information? What is the invention you referred to?"

"Would either o' ye gentlemen be carryin' a comb?" Shanty asked. My partner handed him a small pocket comb, and the old man reached up to run it through Willspeare's hair. "I merely asked myself what sort o' thing ye could hide here," he said.

Willspeare started to object but acquiesced when I touched his shoulder. "Ow," he cried as Shanty tugged at the comb.

Several long strands came out, and Shanty inspected them. He handed one to me. "This would be part of it, Markus."

"Part of what?" Willspeare

asked Shanty with sudden curiosity.

I looked at the long dark fiber. When I took it in my hand, I realized that it was not a hair at all. It was some sort of fine wire. It felt like plastic, but it was as flexible as a hair.

Shanty pulled out more of the fibers. "I should guess they'd be fer a wire-recordin' device, don't y'suppose?"

The whole thing began to make sense. "That must be it! We'll find out for sure at the lab."

"Aye. Mr. Ivan undoubtedly recorded worthwhile data on these wires. When y'arrange them in proper sequence, ye'll have yer message, most likely. The wires themselves are probably a new development of his—much finer than what ye ordinarily use, are they not?"

Willspeare cut in, "How did those things get in my hair?"

"Mr. Ivan—the caller y'had when y'were knocked out in yer hotel room on the trip, lad—he put them there. He merely knotted each wire tight to a hair and left it. These wires are that fine y'cannot tell them from hair unless ye happen t'be lookin' fer them."

I said, "I don't think you'd notice them even if you ran your hand through the hair. I looked for a wig yesterday when we searched him, but I never thought

to check for any individual hairs."

"Aye. They'd be too obvious," Shanty agreed. "And that'd be bringin' us to the third reason why Mr. Ivan chose Willspeare. It was a risky one which he decided t'chance." The old man had been toying with the comb as he talked. "It'd be the fact that Willspeare didn't own one o' these. That's what Mr. Ivan was lookin' fer among the toilet articles, don't y'see. He didn't want the wires t'be accidentally combed or brushed out." Holding the comb between thumb and forefinger like something contaminated, he handed it back to my partner. "When he found that Willspeare did not have a comb or brush, Mr. Ivan hid the wires in that abundant camouflage and then told yer agent, so ye could pick them out later."

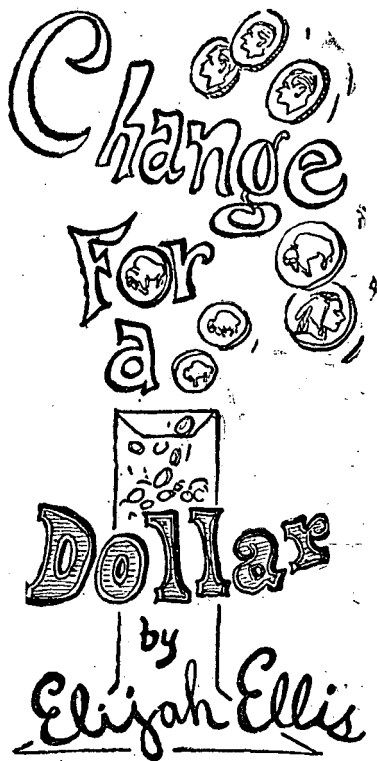
"Shanty, it all seems very simple the way you explain it," I said. "I'm in your debt again."

"Yer entirely welcome," he said. "But if I have been of any help t'ye in this matter, might I be askin' some small recompense?"

I was surprised. "Why, I guess so. What would you like?"

Shanty peered over his spectacles and mischievously eyed Willspeare's hair. "Would ye and yer partner be holdin' Mr. Shaky Willspeare fer a wee moment whilst I find me scissors?"

One who employs a sharp tongue should be prepared for a slice of retribution.



FOR the third time that morning John Brann reached the outward-bound end of his route. He turned the big city bus around and checked his watch. It was 10:28. He was two minutes ahead of schedule. Leaning back in his seat,

he lit a cigarette and smoked in short, angry puffs. He had a belly-ache, and no wonder.

As usual, his wife had undercooked his breakfast bacon and overcooked his eggs.

He wondered if that woman could do anything right. Ten years they'd been married, and she still couldn't cook a decent meal, much less keep house. The place usually looked like a pigsty. Brann had tried and tried to get his wife to improve, but it was hopeless.

Sure, she had a job, but the amount of money she brought in was hardly enough to pay the household bills, and it was certainly no excuse for her sloppiness.

"At least she could cook a man a decent breakfast," John Brann told the rows of empty seats behind him.

Still muttering, he started on the inward-bound leg of his route, stopping to pick up passengers on the way. There weren't many. It was a cold, gray winter morning, probably would start snowing soon. That was all he needed.

About eleven, he reached a stop

in the out-at-the-elbows neighborhood between the north side residential area and the downtown business district. An old woman was at the stop, bundled up in a moth-eaten coat and woolen scarf. She waved a hand at the approaching bus.

"I see you, sister," Brann grumbled. He stopped the bus and levered open the front door.

The old woman took what seemed like five minutes to haul herself up the steps and into the bus. Then she took more time to fumble around in a shabby purse, and came out with a dollar bill.

Another time Brann might have given her just a dirty look and let it go at that, but this morning . . .

"The fare's twenty cents, lady," he said, ignoring the dollar bill.

The old woman's wrinkled face reflected confusion. She said, "I don't have change."

Brann sighed heavily, then reached for the changer hooked to his belt. He shucked out five dimes and ten nickles, dumped them into the old woman's trembling hands after taking the dollar.

As he had expected, the old woman scurried to an empty seat and sat down. She put the handful of change into her purse and fixed her gaze on the floor.

Brann said with exaggerated patience, "Lady. I told you. The

fare is twenty cents. In here." He tapped the fare box on its stand beside his seat.

A passenger muttered, "Oh, for . . ."

The elderly woman blinked around in bewilderment. "What? What's that?"

John Brann waited. "Anytime today, lady," he said.

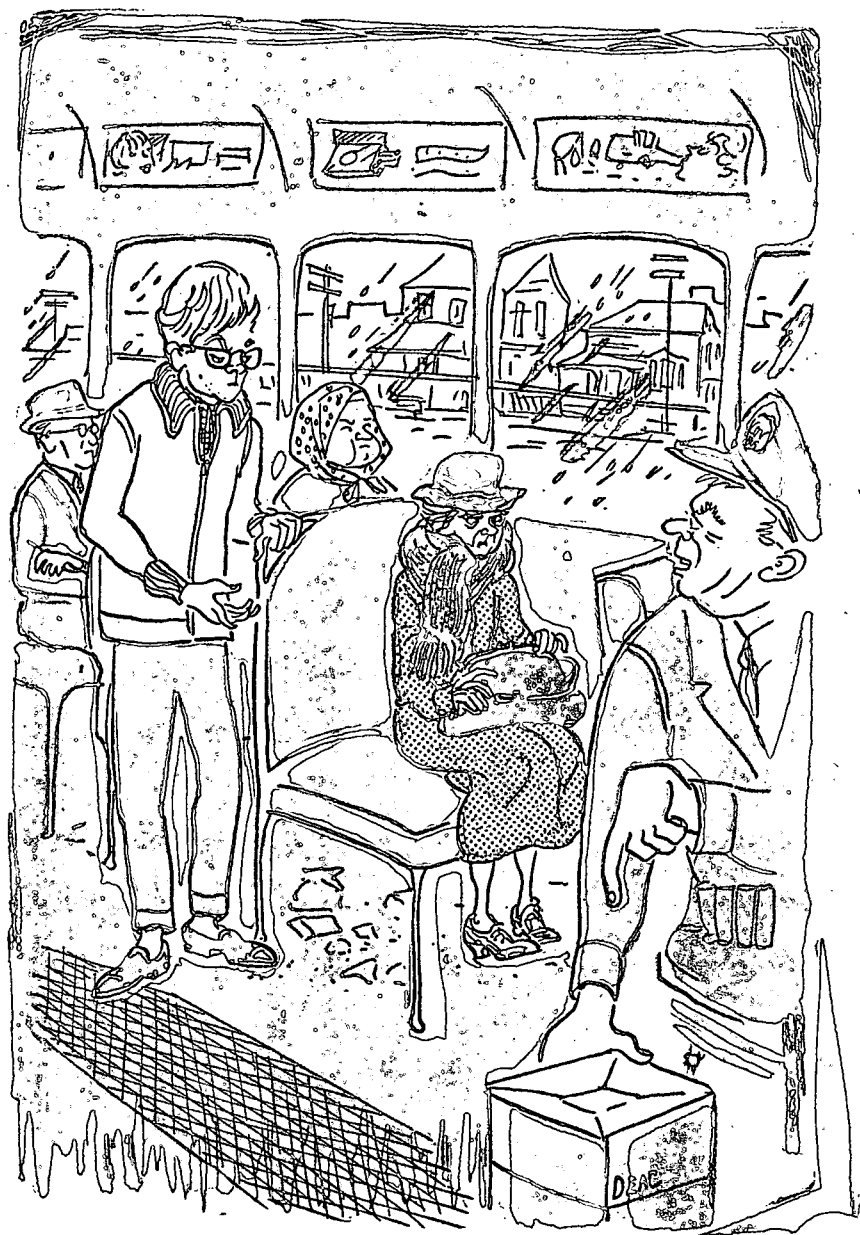
In the seat just behind the confused old woman, a kid nervously cracked his knuckles. He was on his way to his first job interview. It had taken him several days to screw up his courage to the point of actually going. If he could just get that job, maybe—maybe at last he'd be able to break free of the suffocating indulgence of his mother.

Now that he was started, he didn't want any delays. Why the heck didn't that slob of a driver get the bus moving? For gosh sake. Impulsively he got up, a lanky kid with horn-rimmed glasses and a sprinkle of acne marring his cheeks.

"I—I'll put the money in for you," he told the old woman.

She fumbled open her purse and with shaking fingers dug out two dimes, gave them to the kid. He walked forward, dropped the dimes into the fare box, and started back for his seat.

John Brann scowled. Anything



he couldn't take, it was these smart-alec punks. He suddenly tramped on the gas pedal. The big bus lurched forward.

The kid, caught by surprise, waved his arms while his stork-like legs carried him in a ludicrous shambling down the aisle between the rows of seats. He finally managed to get his balance and stop himself by grabbing the vertical metal pole by the rear door.

"Sorry about that," Brann called, while some of the passengers laughed.

The kid ducked his head in an agony of embarrassment. He'd made a fool of himself, as usual. What had ever made him think he could . . .

He got off the bus at the first stop. He was going home. He crossed the street to catch a north-bound bus, not noticing the icy wind that whipped gritty dust and scraps of paper along the street, or the man who stood in a recessed doorway of a sleazy office building near the bus stop.

The man had a bony, beard-stubbled face under a tangle of black hair that curled down over the collar of the ancient suit jacket he wore. A pair of dingy blue jeans and badly worn Army combat boots completed his costume. He gave the kid a quick once-over. Should be good for a quarter,

maybe even a half. He sidled from the doorway and crossed the walk to stand beside the kid.

"Cold, ain't it?" he said.

The kid didn't answer, or even look around.

"Say, I wonder if you could help a man out. You know, I'm goin' to see about a job, but I need to get a shave and—"

Now the kid slowly turned his head and looked at the panhandler. Another time he would have given the guy a quarter—whatever change he might have to spare. Another time; not now.

The kid began to speak, and out spewed every obscenity he'd ever heard, with a few he invented on the spot. The panhandler, startled, took a backward step, then abruptly turned and hurried away. He covered half a block before he got out of range of the kid's shouted invective. He stopped finally on the corner, and stared into a window of a pawnshop.

His eyes focused on his own shadowy reflection in the window. Did he really look like that? Until this moment he had never quite admitted to himself that he was a bum. He'd always held on to the idea that one of these days he was going to straighten up, get a steady job, but when a young kid felt free to talk to you like that . . . and the way the kid had looked

at him, the angry scorn, the—contempt. That was the word, contempt.

Shuddering, he raised a grimy hand, turned up the collar of his jacket against the wind. How he needed a drink, but the cheapest wine cost fifty cents and he had only a quarter.

He was a bum. That kid had made him realize that, once and for all. Too late to change; maybe it had always been too late. All right. That's the way it was. He thoughtfully fingered the rusty switchblade knife in his pants pocket. He'd never pulled any rough stuff, but now was a good time to start. He was a bum; he'd act like a bum.

There was a little candy store around the corner, on the side-street. Probably no more than a couple bucks in its cash drawer, but that was all he needed, right now. It was a start. He hurried around the corner and into the musty store.

The owner of the store took one look at the whiskery, wild-eyed man who came in the front door, waving a knife. Then, with a sigh, he turned to the cash register and punched the "No Sale" button. He had been robbed four times in the past six months.

A minute later the bum rushed out of the store, clutching the

knife in one hand, a couple of crumpled dollar bills in the other. The store owner watched him go, made no move to stop him, not for any lousy two dollars.

The bum plunged blindly into the street, heading for the mouth of an alley on the far side. He never saw the big, expensive car that bore down on him, and the driver of the car didn't see the bum—not until it was too late.

The driver, like the car, was big and expensive. He had a square-jawed face, a touch of distinguished gray at his temples, could have posed for man of distinction ads. He had a solvent business, a wife and three grown children, belonged to several exclusive clubs and was a power in the local chamber of commerce.

At the moment he was on his way for a midday visit to his mistress—perhaps his last visit, perhaps not. He couldn't quite decide. He had been considering the matter as he drove along the side-street toward the main traffic artery that led to the high-rent area where his mistress lived.

At the last split second he saw the figure plunge into the path of his car. The bum almost made it, but the left front fender caught him, sent him cartwheeling through the cold gray air to smash headfirst into the curb on the far,

side of the street, then lie still.

The driver of the car automatically braked to a stop. He looked back at the crumpled figure in the gutter. Then, in sudden panic, he tramped down on the gas pedal and sped away. There was no traffic on the side-street just then, and no pedestrian on the sidewalks, as far as he could see. Besides, the accident had not been his fault. The vital point, however, was that he simply could not be involved. A man in his position in the community . . .

At the intersection he hesitated only a moment before he turned south, toward the downtown business district. He would call his mistress from his club. Yes; tell her it was all over between them. Yes; send her a couple of hundred dollars—by mail—and that would be that.

As he drove, he took a handkerchief from his topcoat pocket and dabbed at the perspiration trickling down his ruggedly handsome, distinguished face. He felt a sudden flicker of anger. That bum, involving him—a man of his standing—in a sordid incident like this. It was intolerable. He had done exactly the right thing, driving away from the scene; yes.

Back on the grimy side-street, a small crowd of people had sprung from nowhere to form a ring

around the dead man sprawled in the gutter. The candy store owner, who had made a note of the license number of the hit-and-run car, was dialing the nearest police precinct station on his phone. He was, in almost all things, a cynically tolerant man, but a long time ago a hit-and-run driver had struck down his wife. The driver had never been caught, and his wife had never walked again.

Now he said into the phone, "Hello, police? I want to report a—murder."

The distinguished man parked in front of his club and went inside. He didn't notice that the left front headlight of his car was broken, and several pieces of the glass were missing. He was too intent on his errand. He headed for the phone booth in the lobby and made his call. Another time he would have handled the matter with tact and good taste; another time, not now.

In the livingroom of a luxurious apartment high in a luxurious building a couple of miles to the north, a woman slammed down the telephone and stood glaring at it.

"Just like that," she said bitterly. "Well—the same to you, Buster, and many of them."

She stormed into the kitchen and poured herself a jolt of im-

ported Scotch. She needed it. The nerve of that guy . . .

Downing her drink, she poured another. Carrying the glass, she followed a familiar path into the bedroom, and stood in front of the full-length mirror there.

She was a blonde—natural blonde, and you better believe it—and if the tiny wrinkles around her eyes were beginning to show a bit, and if she were beginning to sag a bit and really needed a girdle to hold in the bulges, so what? She still had it. She was still—she was—

"I'm thirty-five years old," she admitted to herself.

The way he had talked to her on the phone: cool and distant and completely—uninterested; making it all too clear that she had never been anything to him but a—convenience.

She leaned forward, giving her expertly made-up face a close scrutiny. Thirty-five . . . in a business where thirty-five was just one step this side of the boneyard.

Shaking her head wildly, she hurried to a closet, pulled out a coat trimmed with mink, slung it about her shoulders and half-ran out of the apartment. Maybe a brisk walk would help. Yeah, and maybe turning back the clock ten years would help. Only it didn't work that way.

If he'd given her a reason—his wife; pressure of business—any kind of good reason for calling it quits. But he hadn't! Just that cold dismissal, and didn't that in itself make the reason clear? Thirty-five!

She walked up one street and down the next, not knowing or caring, not even aware that snow had begun to fall from the gray gloom overhead; not a soft snow, but icy pellets driven along the deserted streets by the wind.

Finally she felt the cold and looked around. She must have walked a mile or more. There was a second-rate neighborhood drugstore on the corner. Second-rate—maybe she'd better start getting used to second-rate. At least she could have coffee and get warm. She reached the drugstore, went inside and sat down on a stool near the front of the soda fountain counter.

The waitress, a thin, flat-chested woman with frowzy hair and dumb, cow-like eyes, came wearily toward her. She stared at the waitress and thought, *There I am, in a few weeks, a few months.* Fear surged through her body—and anger.

"Coffee," she snapped at the waitress.

The waitress turned to a coffee urn, drew a cup, and brought it

to the counter. A little of the coffee slopped over into the chipped saucer under the cup.

The blonde glared at the slatternly waitress. With an irritated shrug, she reached for the sugar dispenser. The waitress plodded away. She had forgotten to give the blonde a spoon, or cream.

"You," the blonde said. Her voice rose, "You! Don't you serve cream with your coffee? And maybe a spoon?"

"Ma'am?" the waitress said, her cow-eyes blinking.

The manager of the drugstore looked up from a display case he was restocking on the far side of the store, and frowned. Now what? Slowly he moved toward the soda fountain.

"Don't 'ma'am' me," the blonde cried. She knew she was acting silly, making something of nothing, but she didn't care. Right now, this moment, she wanted to hit out at someone—anyone. She shrilled, "What kind of lousy place is this, anyway?"

The waitress blinked. "Ma'am? I don't—"

"What's the difficulty?" the manager asked. He ran an eye over the blonde, noted the expensive coat, the well-kept face. He knew class when he saw it.

The blonde got off the counter stool, whirled toward the door. "I

didn't come in here to be insulted!"

"I'm sure there's been a—a misunderstanding," the manager said, following her, dry-washing his soft, pale hands. "Please—" But the woman was gone, slamming out the door into the thickening snow, leaving behind only the rich aroma of her perfume.

For a few seconds the manager stared after her, then turned and looked around the store. There were no customers just now. Finally his eyes settled on the woman behind the counter.

"What happened?" he snapped. "What did you do?"

"Noth—nothing," the woman stammered. "I don't know. She asked for coffee, and all of a sudden she—"

"And you forgot to give her cream," the manager broke in. "And then got smart with her when she asked—"

"No! I didn't do anything." The waitress lifted her hands helplessly. Her face turned a mottled pink.

The manager looked at the wall clock. A quarter after one, and the woman behind the soda fountain was due to go off duty at two . . . As scarce as customers were in this weather, the manager knew he could handle the soda fountain until the other waitress came on.

He nodded his head thoughtful-

ly. For days now, he'd been looking for a good reason to fire this dame. She was too ugly and too slow for the job. He'd never liked her. Also, he thought he knew where he could find a girl who would work the morning shift for five dollars a day, instead of the six dollars he'd been paying this one.

He nodded again, decisively, then said crisply, "I'm sorry, Martha, but I'm going to have to let you go. If there's anything the store will not tolerate, it's rudeness to our customers."

"But I—"

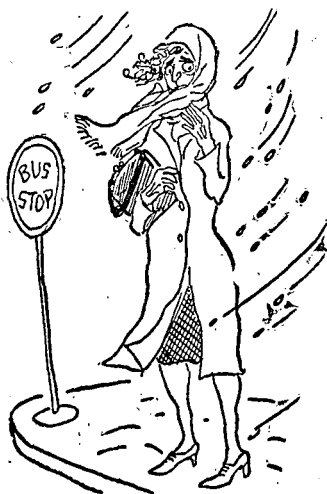
"No. I'll make out your check, and you can leave right now. And don't expect to be paid for the full day, not after the way you insulted that lady."

The waitress, Martha, opened her mouth, then shut it again. It had all happened too fast for her. She didn't think she'd insulted the lady, but—

A few minutes later Martha left the drugstore. There was a bus stop on the corner. She waited under the canopy in front of the store, watching the snow come down. She shivered inside her thin cloth coat, tightened the scarf around her head. She waited, wondering how she was ever going to explain to her husband why she'd lost her job when she didn't know

why, herself. Her husband would probably . . .

The bus loomed out of the snow, stopped, and she stepped inside, grateful for the warmth. She dropped two dimes in the fare box—she was careful always to have the exact change for the bus; her



husband had taught her that—then she took a seat back toward the rear.

Her husband! At least she had a couple of hours before he would get home from work, before she had to tell him she had lost her job. What would he say? She shook her head in dumb misery. She knew what he would say.

She left the bus at the stop nearest her home, plodded through the

deepening snow for the final block and arrived trembling and breathless. Inside, she headed straight for the kitchen and put on water for tea.

She looked around the kitchen. The breakfast dishes were piled in the sink. She must remember to wash them, tidy up the house generally, make the bed, empty the garbage, run the sweeper over the livingroom rug, maybe.

That would please her husband.

Martha took off her coat and folded it over the back of a chair at the kitchen table. First, though, she'd have some tea—and consider what, how, was she going to tell him.

A little after four, John Brann keyed open the front door and tramped into his house. It had been a lousy day; lousy. Driving a city bus was hard work in the best of weather. On a day like this, it was sheer—

A clattering sound from the kitchen interrupted his sour thoughts. Then his wife's voice, "John?"

He walked into the kitchen. "What're you doing?"

Martha was at the sink, hastily finishing the last of the dirty dishes. She hadn't realized how late it was getting. She gave her husband a strained smile.

He ignored it, went back into

the hall to take off and hang up his overcoat and bus driver's cap. While he did, he looked along the dusty hallway into the livingroom. It was a mess; magazines and last night's papers scattered around. Wouldn't that woman ever learn!

Martha nervously put away the washed dishes, then dried her hands on the dish towel and carefully hung the towel on its rack over the sink.

Her husband returned. He jerked out a chair and sat down, lit a cigarette and smoked it in short, angry puffs. Martha shrunk into herself. If only she'd had time to tidy up the house—

"I don't know," John Brann said, not looking at her. "I work like a dog all day. Then I come home and what do I find? House looks like a—a pigsty. It ain't like you didn't have the time to keep the place halfway decent."

Martha folded her arms across her chest, shivering.

Brann went on, and on.

Martha was used to it, of course. She should be, after all these years—and, in a way, she had to admit her husband was right. Yet this time some alien thing stirred deep within her brain. She looked inward and saw the angry face of that blonde woman, shrilling at her, and the sly face of the store manager as he fired her.

Brann kept talking, a monologue of complaints, his voice rumbling on and on like an endless train. Martha stared at his broad back, at the close-clipped, bristly hair on the back of his neck.

The thing within her stirred again, began to gnaw at the edges of her conscious mind.

Brann sat at the table, smoking another cigarette, intent only on what he was saying.

Martha turned to a drawer and opened it. Slowly she took a heavy butcher knife from the drawer. She didn't know why—only that the gnawing thing in her brain was telling her to. She raised the knife, looked at its shiny ten-inch blade.

"And another thing," John Brann said.

Martha took a step toward him. The thing inside her suddenly screamed, *Now!*

The knife cut a glittering arc through the air and then its blade sank deep into John Brann's back. He gave one loud grunt and fell forward across the table. Then his

big body slid to the side and down, and he landed on the floor on his back, the lower half of his right leg still resting across the seat of the chair.

Martha looked at the body on the floor. It didn't move. She breathed, "John?"

The items in Brann's right-hand trousers pocket began to trickle out, thumping and tinkling on the kitchen floor: a small pocketknife, a key ring, some coins.

"John?" Martha said, wonderingly. Then she stared at the little heap of things that had fallen from the upended trousers pocket. There was a dime; two quarters; another dime, and still another. And four nickles. A dollar's worth of change, exactly.

Martha went to the window and looked out. She said over her shoulder, "John, you'll get your uniform all dusty, lying there."

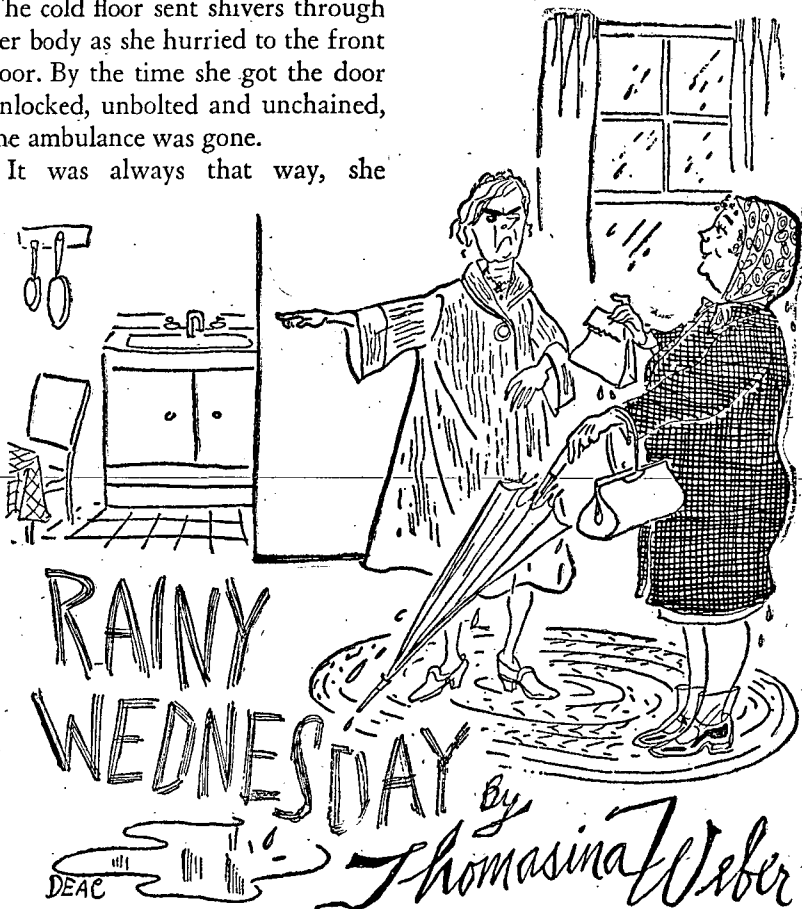
She stared out at the snow sifting down from the gray winter sky. She stared and stared, while the window frosted over and the light dimmed, and faded into darkness.



With a change in the weather one should also be alert for vicissitudes in temperament.

WHEN the siren split the air like a witch's shriek, Mae leaped out of bed and pulled her robe about her. The cold floor sent shivers through her body as she hurried to the front door. By the time she got the door unlocked, unbolted and unchained, the ambulance was gone.

It was always that way, she



thought peevishly as she secured the door once again. She simply was not fast enough. You would think that to a poor old lady with no excitement in her life the Fates would be kind once in a while. As it was, there would be nothing to tell Pauline about at lunch today, and that meant Mae would have to listen to a long dreary account of Pauline's latest dream.

Mae went back to bed, but she did not sleep. It was nearly four o'clock and she lay on her back staring into the darkness. Four o'clock was an unlikely hour for an automobile accident, she reasoned, so it would be safe to assume the ambulance had been called for a different reason. Heart attack? Possibly, especially if the victim were a man. Just like a man to inconvenience his wife in the middle of the night. Or it might be some young woman about to have a baby. Mae wrinkled her nose in the dark. Miserable creatures, babies, self-centered little monsters, and the women who bore them were not much better, carrying on like that. There were times Mae Krone was glad she had never married.

The room grew lighter and Mae decided she might as well get up. It was while she was boiling water for tea that the rain began. Mae pulled the curtain aside indig-

nantly. Rain on *Wednesday*? Didn't everyone know Wednesday was her only day off, the day she always met her sister Pauline in the park for lunch, where they shared a thin sandwich and an afternoon of talk? Mae dropped the curtain in disgust. "Wouldn't you know," she said aloud, "it would have to rain when it was Pauline's turn to bring the sandwich!"

Mae could not remember a time when she had ever loved her sister. Pauline had been the pretty one with the coquettish manner, but behind the sparkling blue eyes reposed a weak, vacuous mind. Flirtatious though Pauline was, her deficiency of brains must have been too noticeable for any of her numerous boyfriends to propose marriage, so she and Mae, husbandless, approached their forties, Mae stoically, and Pauline with an ill-concealed desperation—until Arthur had come along.

Arthur was a forty-five year old bachelor, innocent in the ways of women, having reached that foolish age intact. Perhaps that was one reason he had appealed so to Mae, but his main attraction had been his fine mind. Mae had met Arthur when he came to join the library soon after his arrival in town. As head librarian, she issued him a card. There was an immediate rapport between them and Arthur be-

gan to visit the library nearly every night. Pauline heard about it, of course, and when Mae would tell her nothing, she contrived to confront them one evening, forcing Mae to introduce them. That was the end for Mae. The flesh took over and Arthur succumbed to Pauline's obvious charms. To this day Mae could not understand how a mind such as Arthur's could be discerning enough to recognize a kindred soul in Mae and yet be stupid enough to overlook Pauline's lack of one.

Mae had been dreadfully hurt and humiliated by this treachery, but she hid it well; well enough, in fact, to give Pauline her first bridal shower after the engagement announcement. It was only natural, therefore, for Pauline to turn to Mae for comfort when Arthur was killed in that unfortunate accident a few nights later.

"They will find the one responsible," Mae had said soothingly. "They always find a hit-and-run driver."

"No, they don't," wailed Pauline, "but what does it matter who hit him? Arthur's *gone!* My Arthur's *gone!*"

He was not your Arthur, Mae wanted to tell her. You were not married yet. She would also have liked to tell Pauline that good never results from wrongdoing,

and if Pauline had not stolen Arthur from Mae, chances are the tragedy would never have happened. Mae, however, said none of these things, but provided a shoulder for Pauline's tears. Figuratively, Pauline had never stopped crying. It would not occur to her, Mae thought bitterly, that perhaps Mae was mourning Arthur's death, too.

After Arthur's death, the two women were never far apart. Each lived alone, Pauline in an apartment, while Mae stayed on in the small family homestead after the death of their parents. Somehow the question of joint tenancy never came up, for which Mae was grateful. Although she kept telling herself that she ought to break away completely, Mae could not bring herself to do it. She liked to look at Pauline, rounder and frumpier now, and remind herself that Arthur had really been saved from a miserable life.

At half past ten a knock came to the door, and Mae called, "Who is it?"

"It's Pauline."

Now, what was she doing here? Mae unlocked and unbolted the door, opening it only as far as the safety chain would allow. When Pauline smiled in at her, Mae frowned and shut the door to unhook the chain.

"I hope you don't mind my com-

ing over like this," said Pauline in a tremulous voice, "but it is our day and—"

"You're puddling on the floor."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She held the dripping umbrella out at arm's length as if that would stop the water.

"Come into the kitchen and put it in the sink," said Mae, leading the way.

"We could hardly sit in the park in the rain," said Pauline, "and I brought the sandwich."

"We don't usually meet when it rains," said Mae, reaching for the umbrella to open it.

"I know, but I had to see you," said Pauline, tightening her grip on the umbrella. "Leave it closed, Mae! Don't you know it's bad luck to open an umbrella in the house?" She placed it in the sink.

"You have had another dream, I suppose?"

"Yes, and this one is too terrible for words."

"Good. Then I won't have to listen to it."

For a moment Pauline seemed surprised, then she laughed. "Oh, Mae, you always act so grumpy about my dreams, but you would never let me rest if I didn't tell you about them."

Mae sighed. "I only let you tell me because if I didn't, you would blab them all over town."

"You don't have to put it in the icebox, Mae. It's only peanut butter." Peanut butter! All Pauline knew how to make was peanut butter sandwiches, and she made them so thin you could see through them.

Mae knew Pauline was impatient for her to sit down so she could begin telling her about the dream, so she perversely discovered non-essential tasks to keep her on her feet. She would not have been so reluctant had she been able to report something definite on the ambulance that had wakened her. Although Mae considered herself far above Pauline in intelligence, maturity and perspicacity, Pauline always had the most to talk about. That was depressing to Mae until she remembered what they say about an empty barrel and she felt better.

Pauline was rattling on about a vacuum cleaner salesman who had called on her the previous day. "Really, Mae, he was such an adorable man that I simply couldn't say no."

"You mean you ordered a vacuum cleaner?"

"Well, I didn't want to disappoint him. He seemed so eager and he said I was his very first prospect."

"But you don't even own a rug!"

Pauline wrung her hands.

"That's just it, Mae. I see now how foolish I was. But what am I going to do?"

How Mae despised weakness! She could not understand how Pauline had lived this long on her own with no one to do for her and make her decisions. "Did you give him any money?"

"No."

"Then just refuse to accept it when he makes delivery."

"All right, but I'm sure that will bring him bad luck, his very first prospect backing out like that."

The mention of bad luck reminded Mae of the ambulance and her misfortune in not being quick enough to see it. To forestall Pauline's narration of her latest nightmare, she asked quickly, "Did you hear the ambulance this morning?"

"No, I didn't, and it's a wonder too, because I slept so poorly, what with that dream and all."

"Four o'clock it went by. It shot me right out of bed."

"I awoke at two o'clock and tossed and turned—"

"It went right by the house, its siren wide open—"

"Arthur was in the dream and he was walking down that dark street alone, except that you could see his white jacket. You remember the white jacket Arthur used to have—"

"It went by so fast I could only

catch the merest glimpse of any—"

"That's the funny thing about it. That jacket showed up in the dark. Wouldn't you think that driver would have seen—"

"It looked like a man in the ambulance and he was quite a big man. I could tell because—"

"So whoever ran Arthur over was either drunk or he did it on purpose."

"You would think an ambulance could go to the hospital a little more quietly when it is the middle of the night."

"Mae! You have not heard a word I said!"

Mae looked in surprise at Pauline's flushed face. "Of course I heard you, just as much as you heard me. I think I had less than your undivided attention."

"How can you talk to me like that?" said Pauline, fishing for a handkerchief to dab at her eyes.

"Arthur comes to me in a dream and you are not even interested enough to listen!"

"I was listening, Pauline. Arthur was wearing his white jacket."

"But that isn't all!"

"That's all you said."

"You wouldn't shut up long enough for me to finish!"

Mae pulled a chair out and sat down, her hands folded on the table before her. "Very well, Pauline, you may continue. I will sit here

quietly and listen with all my ears."

Pauline sniffled several times and smoothed her skirt. With a final dab at her eyes, she went on. "I think Arthur was trying to tell me something. That's the reason he came to me in my dream."

"Really, Pauline! Do you expect me to believe that Arthur finally got around to communicating?"

"Well, we don't know how things are on the other side. Maybe a year is only a day to them. An hour, even."

"And what was this earth-shaking thing Arthur wanted to tell you?"

"You'll never believe it! I hardly believe it myself. If it was anyone but Arthur—"

"And of course it could not be anyone but Arthur."

"Of course. I ought to know Arthur when I see him. After all, we were—"

"You seem to forget that it was only a dream, Pauline."

"It was as real as life. He was standing there with his white jacket all bloody—"

"You mean he hasn't found a laundry on the other side?"

"Mae, you are making fun of me. Now, this is a very serious thing, as you will see if you ever let me finish telling you."

"So sorry."

"Very well. He was standing

there, all bloody, holding out his arms, or trying to because the left one was broken in three places, and his legs—"

"Pauline! I do not care to listen to a clinical description of the body. Now either you spit out what you are trying to say, or pick up your peanut butter sandwich and go home."

Pauline's eyes narrowed. "For two cents, I would do just that, Miss High and Mighty, but Arthur's communication happens to concern you and I think you should be the first to know."

"It concerns me, does it? And just what did Arthur say?"

"Well, he pointed to his white jacket."

"Yes?"

"As if he wanted me to notice it."

"But what did he say, Pauline?"

"He said—well, actually all he said was 'Mae', but I could tell from the way he said it that it meant something."

"Oh, without a doubt."

"It was your name, Mae."

"So?"

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"About what?"

"About what Arthur said!"

"'Mae'?"

"Of course! He was trying to tell me that you were the one who killed him!"

"You are nuttier than a fruitcake, Pauline."

"I see it all, just as plain as day. He was trying to tell me it was no accident because anyone could have seen his white jacket in the dark. If it hadn't been for that dream, I would never have remembered he had been wearing that jacket the night he was killed. And when he said 'Mae', he was naming his murderer."

"Now I have heard everything."

"No, you haven't. That isn't all Arthur said."

"Oh?"

"He said, 'Beware!'"

"*Beware?*" Mae burst out laughing. "How corny can you get? I suppose he was trying to tell you that I am going to kill you next."

"Exactly."

Mae stared at her sister. "You've got to be kidding."

Pauline shook her head.

"Would you mind telling me the whole plot, then? First, why did I kill Arthur? And second, why am I going to kill you?"

"Because Arthur used to be your beau before I came along."

Mae sighed. "Pauline, if that were the case, do you think I would have waited until now to kill you?"

Pauline's smile faded. "Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Now, if I were you, Pauline, I

would not spread a story like that around town."

"But you did get rid of your car right after the accident," said Pauline.

"A coincidence. I had been planning to get rid of it for some time."

"And you have never driven a car since."

"I never did like driving."

"And you had that nervous breakdown a month later."

"I was working too hard. We were short of help and I put in a lot of overtime."

"You used to love Arthur."

"That, too. His death affected me deeply, even though I didn't weep and wail all over town as you did."

"I was engaged to him!"

"How well I know."

"A week later and we would have been married."

"He was a louse."

"Mae! How dare you say that?"

"Just because you swung your skirt more than I did, he lost all perspective."

"Are you insinuating that—"

"He was blinded by sex. We could have had a good life together with our mutual interest in books and philosophy and then you spoiled it all!"

"There is more to life than books and philosophy, Mae dear, but of course you wouldn't know anything about that!"

"He would not have been happy with you. His life would have been empty and futile, leading nowhere."

"You don't know what you are talking about! I would have made him happy. I would have given him love and care and children. And now because of you, I have no children!" Pauline jumped to her feet.

"Because of *me*?"

"You killed Arthur, I know you did! And you haven't killed me yet because it gives you more satisfaction to watch me grow old and fat and lonely!" Pauline was at the sink, groping in the folds of her wet umbrella. "When I came over you got me all confused by asking questions and arguing and I thought maybe I was wrong after all, but now I know it's true. I see you for what you really are, Mae Krone, and I don't know how I could have been so blind all these years." Pauline, having freed the knife from the folds of the umbrella, whirled around—just in time to see the iron skillet descending on her head.

The morning had grown older, and Mae was sitting on a kitchen chair, the iron skillet in her lap. Pauline was lying on the floor. It was very rude of Pauline to come visiting and then curl up on the floor and go to sleep like that. Oh well, Pauline was an idiot, an empty-headed idiot. Some time ago, Mae did not know how long, she had heard the milkman's truck in the driveway. He had knocked on the glass of the door—and then he had gone away. She wondered if he had left the milk on the step.

Suddenly a siren shattered the silence. Instinctively, Mae leaped to her feet and ran to the front room. Her luck was changing! She was not too late this time. It sounded like a police car and it was coming closer. Then she saw it. It was stopping in front of her house. How nice! They had finally taken pity on a poor old lady and were going to stop and tell her what was going on. She would make them a nice cup of tea for their trouble. And just wait until next Wednesday! She would make Pauline green with envy.



As Charles Lamb was wont to say, "Presents endear absents."



I MET her in the Bahamas in the gambling room of the newest and richest and most social resort of them all. For thirty minutes I stood behind her chair and watched her feed the roulette wheel close to ten thousand dollars in that time.

She was small and slight, ash-blond and small boned. Her eyes were black, her sheath dress was black satin, and she wore a single dark sapphire ring and a necklace

of matched black pearls. Her fingernail polish was black, her evening bag was beaded jet—a study in black and white.

She wasn't young—anywhere between forty-five and sixty—but her body had the ageless grace of a tiger's and the thrusting allure of a woman hungry for life. The first sight of her had pulled me over to her table, and the more I watched the more I knew I had to meet her. I had no idea who she was, but I meant to find out.

I'm Johnny Hawk, and my home is the world. On this night I had good cloth on my back, fine leather on my feet, old brandy in my blood and money in my pocket. It was enough to bring me to this place, but not enough to keep me from wanting more.

I wasn't ready yet to settle down. The money I had was the taste of blood to a hungry wolf. I'd never seen Grand Bahama, and the legal gambling drew me.

By Edward Y. Breese



It's not that I'm much of a gambler myself. I know that gambling draws people with too much money and too little brain. It draws the frightened, the lonely, the insecure, the rich and the bored, and where those people gather there is opportunity for my kind. So here I was.

The woman in black pushed back her chair. When she stood up that ash-blond hair came just to my mouth. It was soft and heady with perfume. She must have been drinking earlier because she was unsteady on her feet and brushed against me. I caught her arm.

"I'm clumsy," I said. "I should have gotten out of your way."

She tilted her head to look at me with those soft, black velvet eyes. The line of her cheek wasn't young, but it was smooth and firm, and her smile was all woman. "I'm *not* clumsy," she said. "I did that deliberately. I've known you were behind me all the time."

"I hoped you knew," I said. "I've been waiting to find out."

She smiled. "Both of us have been waiting. Now we don't have to wait anymore."

We went out of the gambling room to a table on the broad terrace under the stars. A soft footed, British voiced Bahamian waiter brought brandy in bell glasses and the wind brought a smell of salt and far distances from the sea.

"I'm Johnny Hawk," I said. "I had to come and stand behind you. I couldn't help myself."

She put her glass down and looked at me, the black eyes no longer soft. As they came into focus, a mind looked out at me with sudden interest. "I thought I'd seen you somewhere. I have. In Matamoros, Mexico, five years ago. Oh, don't look so puzzled. I wasn't a blonde then, and I wasn't in the foreground. You were. You did a job for my husband."

I thought hard. I didn't really place her, but there was only one job that fit. "Phil Panama? You're married to Phil the Brain?"

She laughed a low and throaty laugh. Her eyes mocked and caressed me all at once. "I was his wife," she said, "for eighteen years. I made him a good wife too. He died a year ago, of a heart attack while we were on vacation in Rio. He's buried under another name."

I thought hard. Phil the Brain had been a big name in the world of night people. He was the idea man, the contact man, the fixer and the planner. He'd earned his name with his ability to plan a job down to the last fine detail and see that it was carried through. He'd worked for the Big Ones, was trusted but not a member. "The Human Computer" sold his brain to the highest bidder—and the bids

were assuredly very high indeed.

I looked at her again in the moonlight. I couldn't believe it—or maybe I didn't want to. When I had seen him Phil Panama was wrinkled and bent, and two years older than sin. This woman wasn't young but she was totally alive. I couldn't quite figure it.

She read my mind of course. "Don't underestimate The Brain," she said. "Phil could make a woman love him and never see him except the way he wanted her to. I'll admit I married him for his money, but it was a good life as long as he lived. A *good* life. Never think any different."

I believed her. "You miss him?" I said. "That's why . . ." I waved my hand in the general direction of the gambling rooms. I think I meant to include myself in the question.

"No. We both knew I'd outlive him. I was ready for that part." She gave me a quizzical look and laughed. "I think he might approve of you, too. He knew there'd be a succession of *yous*. No, the gambling was because I'm scared."

She took a sip of brandy. I waited. She'd either tell me, or she wouldn't.

"Yesterday I had a bodyguard," she said. "He didn't show up this morning. I don't think he will. It may be he got scared, or it may be

the crabs are eating him. I'm being honest."

"You want me to take his place?"

"From what I remember of you, you could. I'd make it well worth your while. Say five thousand dollars a day, if you can keep me alive for three days?" She paused again and gave me one of those all-woman looks. "Besides possible fringe benefits—depending on you."

I liked her. She was scared for her life, but she could still think of a man as a man. Phil picked his woman well.

"Come along," she said. "I've the last cottage but one in the row along the beach. There's more brandy, and I can tell you the story there."

We took the flagstoned path just back of the beach in the shadow of the palms. Every hundred yards or so a side path led back to one of the luxury cottages maintained by the hotel. We had at least a quarter mile to go.

She saw the shadow following as soon as I did. "We've got a tail," she said. "The path makes a bend just up ahead. We'll run around it. When he follows, you take him."

I couldn't have improved the idea. When we ran, the shadow ran. Once around the curve I let her run on. I dropped into the shadow of a bush and slipped off

my alligator belt. As he came around the turn, I whipped the end of the belt toward him. It caught one ankle, twisted and held just long enough to bring him down on his face. I pinned his shoulders and chopped him behind the ear. She hadn't said—so I didn't strike hard enough to kill him.

He had a blue steel automatic with a silencer under his left arm-pit. I took it, and the two extra magazines and switchblade knife from his pockets. By that time she was back. I gave her his wallet. He was so confident he even carried identification.

When he blinked and sat up, she spoke to him quietly. "I know who you are. If you aren't on the next plane out of here, I'll tell Mr. Marko."

"Okay, I'll be on it." He got up and went away on rubber legs.

I didn't blame him. Mr. Marko is very hot company indeed. They don't come any faster company than Mr. Marko, not any way you figure it.

We went on down the path without saying anything. The gun and clips I put in my pocket. The knife I threw into bushes. One of the gardeners would find it and keep it. He might even use it someday.

Her cottage was one of those held for real V.I.P.'s, with Italian

marble floors and modernistic furnishings. Because of the nature of some of the clients, the windows were shatterproof glass behind bronze grilles, and the door was heavy, with a heavy duty bolt.

"We can talk," she said. "When I moved in, this place was bugged. It isn't now."

I wondered if she'd pulled the bugs herself, or just mentioned Mr. Marko's name. She was capable of either, I was sure. She poured me a brandy and motioned me beside her on a deep, soft couch. "That was capably done back on the path," she said. "No wasted motion."

I laughed. "No fuss, no muss, no screaming, that's Johnny Hawk. But if you're a friend of the Big M, why do you need a bodyguard?"

"Be still a minute and I'll tell you. I've sold something, Johnny. I've sold it, but I haven't delivered it yet. The price is a million dollars." She waited, but I said nothing. I think she liked that.

"Phil planned this with me long before he died," she continued. "In a way it was his legacy to me. He—we, that is—spent his money as fast as he made it. There wasn't enough left to last two years at the rate I like to spend. We both knew that would be so. Phil showed me the out."

"I'm in on a Phil Panama job," I

said. "That's *the big time* for Johnny Hawk."

"It's 'the big time' for Ann Panama too." It was the first time she'd used her name. "Now, don't interrupt again. I'm selling Phil—that is, I'm selling Phil's memory. He kept everything written down. He wrote down names and dates and plans and proofs. He wrote down what judge sold out, and for what price. He wrote down every fix and how it was done. It's all in a book in his own hand."

I was properly impressed. She could see it.

"That's right, Johnny. There's enough in that book to hang a hundred men and to ruin a hundred political careers. There's a million years of blackmail in that book. That's what I've got to sell."

"Why don't you use it yourself?" I said. "I mean sell it bit by bit instead of all at once?"

"And make lots more than one million? Two reasons, Johnny. I wouldn't use blackmail. Phil never did. He sold his brains, and the price was always high. That's all he sold. He hated a blackmailer."

I didn't really know whether to believe her or not.

"Besides, Johnny, I wouldn't dare. You can believe that. I'm a woman alone, and the men whose names are in that book would kill me in a minute if they had the

chance. Sooner or later I'd slip. I could never make it alone. No, I'm not greedy enough to die for it. I'm doing it the way Phil planned. I let it be known I had the book, and that it was for sale to the highest bidder. Mr. Marko made the highest bid. He would, of course. He already has the money and the men and the organization to use a thing like this."

I knew that was true. Marko could make millions out of the book. "Why doesn't he just kill you and take the book?"

She drank more brandy. It was beginning to show on her. She swung a sleek leg up and rested her ankle on my knee. "Because, you idiot, he knows Phil planned this job. He knows I won't have the book till it's time to deliver. If I'm killed before I get the money, the book goes to the F.B.I.—and his name is in the book. He knows that. Everybody's name is in that book, Johnny. You wouldn't believe the names that are in there."

I said, "Okay then, Ann Panama, what danger *are* you in? Who wants to kill you? They must know Marko is the buyer."

"I don't know, Johnny. Honestly I don't. It might be any one of the names—or several working independently. It might be something else again—somebody out of our league. There are *big* names in

that book, really big names. There's been one try to shoot me so far—and that man tonight—and Mack, my guard, has disappeared. Honest, Johnny, I'm scared."

"When and where do you pay off?"

"In an office of a lawyer in Miami on Thursday. That's the third day from now. I get a cashier's check drawn on a Swiss bank, and payable only if I'm present in Switzerland and my fingerprints check out. That's what Phil said to ask for."

"Your life is worth a million dollars," I said.

She thought that over. "Okay, Johnny. Ten thousand a day for three days—and fringe benefits too . . ." Then she kissed me.

That kiss made me realize how smart Phil the Brain really had been. At the same time I knew it was partly just because she was scared. To tell the truth, if I'd taken time to think things through, I'd have been scared myself. This was big. It was bigger than anything Johnny Hawk had ever touched before.

The crucial point was how she meant to get the book to Mr. Marko at his lawyer's. As soon as she touched that book she was a dove under the guns of a hundred hunters—but her real danger didn't start till she touched that book.

Once she did, I wondered if a regiment of guards could protect her. I needed to know how Phil had figured that.

The trouble was, she wasn't in any mood to talk. The brandy was taking hold and making her reckless. It was making me reckless too. If it hadn't, I wouldn't have been Johnny Hawk.

I stayed at the cottage overnight. There wasn't much left of it anyway. If there were any prowlers outside, they didn't bother us. I didn't really think there were. The real danger was still a couple of days off.

In the morning we were both up early. I was stiff and sore from restless dozing on the livingroom couch and from the cumulative effects of the brandy. Ann was fresh as a daisy, and used the phone to order a big breakfast for two sent over from the hotel kitchen.

"After we eat we talk," she said brightly.

It wasn't quite that easy. I was still pushing ham and eggs around a Dresden plate when the little man came up the cottage walk and rang the bell. He looked harmless enough, but I made sure the gun with the silencer was in my waistband, my jacket covering it, before opening the door.

I soon realized that a gun wouldn't be needed with this one. He

was small and old, and as clean and unnerving as a drowsy krait, the innocent appearing, deadly little cobra. His only weapon was a heavy manila envelope which he promptly took from his briefcase.

"My name is Smith, Mrs. Panama," he said, coming right to the point. "In this envelope is a cashier's check for a million and a half dollars."

Ann kept her eyes off the envelope. It seemed to surprise him. "Whom do you represent, Mr. Smith?" she asked.

He smiled. "I thought you would know," he said. "My principals are Mr. Jones and Mr. Doe. That doesn't in the least affect the validity of the signature on this check."

"I won't waste your time," she said. "You are too late, Mr. Smith. The merchandise has already been sold. In view of your offer, I'm sorry. But that's the way it is."

"I know," he said. He sounded almost bored. "Surely you will not let such a trivial detail prevent you from considering a fifty percent increase in price."

"My life is not a trivial detail. The buyer would most surely take it, if I should default on our deal. You must know this."

"We had anticipated that Mr. Marko might feel a natural pique," he said. "Suppose I told you that there are ways in which my prin-

cipals might offer you protection."

"Let's stop fencing, Mr. Smith." She smiled at him. "We both understand that Mr. Marko will have good reason not to let anything happen to me after the deal is concluded. He will realize that I will retain copies of certain records. The fact will make him very solicitous of my health. You understand."

"And my principals?"

"I am quite sure that Messrs Jones and Doe would not be in any way afraid of any information I might retain. The merchandise would be of equal value to them whatever might happen to me."

He thought that over. "We underestimated your intelligence, Mrs. Panama. I suppose the money doesn't really tempt you then?"

"I didn't say that, Mr. Smith. I only said that, to save my own life, I must sell to Mr. Marko."

"Suppose the merchandise were taken from you against your will?" He was perfectly at ease now.

"I couldn't help that, could I? There's one thing you should know, however. I do not have the merchandise with me. You may search this place, if you wish. It isn't here, nor is anything that would tell you where it is or how to get it. And I'm sure you know that in case of my untimely death it would be lost to you forever."

He nodded. "I'm sure that you

and your late husband provided for that." He got up to go. "By the way, Mrs. Panama, the man whom your friend here disarmed last night was no agent of mine. I believe he represented one of the unsuccessful bidders."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm sure you didn't send him. Show Mr. Smith to the door, Johnny."

When I came back she was standing by the window looking thoughtfully out at the sea. "I'm glad Mr. Smith called, Johnny," she said. "He's a clever man. He'll see that nobody else gets to me from now on. I feel safer now I really know he's here."

"That's a dangerous man," I said.

"Of course, but only when it will pay him. Not any other time. Marko would kill for greed or revenge or even spite. The men whose records Marko is buying would kill me from fear. I think that Mr. Smith's principals have no such emotions. They have no reason to kill me, and perhaps good reason not to want my death traced to them."

I didn't ask who those principals were. Some things are better not put into words.

Ann continued, "I'll be quite safe until I actually touch the book, I think. Mr. Marko's men will be protecting me. Mr. Smith's friends will watch over me. And, of course,

you'll be protecting me too, Johnny. You will, won't you?"

"Thanks," I said. "I was beginning to wonder why you needed me at all."

"I need you, Johnny. You're my ace-in-the-hole, my hidden derringer. You're here in case one of the jokers goes wild, so to speak. Phil didn't know who you'd be, but he said to be sure and have you around." She gave me a brighter look. "Besides, you're my fringe benefits. You keep me from being afraid or lonely."

She didn't look, then, as if loneliness or fear could ever touch her. In the morning sunshine she was calm and in control of herself, blurring the wild way she had gambled the night before and the urgency of her kiss. I had to try hard to remember.

We spent that day (Tuesday) and most of Wednesday quietly on the beach and at the hotel. She played the wheel again, but only for small stakes. I'm sure we were watched. I even spotted a couple of them, but it didn't seem to bother her.

Late Wednesday afternoon we took the cruise ship to Miami. "It's the safe way," she told me. "Somebody desperate enough might eliminate a small plane or even a yacht or speedboat. The cruise ship is too big and with too many people

aboard. Nothing will happen till we get to Miami."

I agreed with her, yet I insisted we spend the entire trip in her air conditioned cabin. I didn't want to risk hearing shouts of, "Woman overboard!" Everything went quietly.

Ann still flatly refused to tell me when and how she expected to pick up the book. "No," she insisted. "Nobody knows that but me. That's the whole point of the plan, Johnny. Phil spotted the one way that's both absolutely sure and absolutely safe. But it wouldn't be safe if anybody but me knew what it is."

"Suppose they figure it out for themselves?"

"They won't." She was absolutely certain.

At the dock in Miami rental cars from three different companies were waiting in her name. She picked one at random, and gave me the key. "Nobody's going to put bombs in three cars," she said. I paid off all three delivery drivers.

We left all our luggage on the boat, and she carried only a small bag. Any watcher could see neither of us had anything the size of a book with us. It was ten a.m. and the dock was full of people. All of them appeared to me to be watching.

I recognized the address she

gave me as the Nth National Bank Building on the main drag. Mar-ko's lawyer had his suite of offices on one of the upper floors. I was surprised.

"No stops?" I asked when we were in the car.

"No stops—and no questions, Johnny."

"Somebody else is bringing it to you there?"

"I said no questions. I meant it."

Before we got out of the cruise line parking lot two carloads of hard-looking men were right with us. I'm sure one or two more picked us up in the downtown traffic. If so, they canceled each other out. Nobody made any actual move to bother us.

When I pulled up at the bank parking garage ramp a big man with "cop" written all over him was waiting. "Lieutenant Ryan of the Miami Police, Mrs. Panama," he introduced himself.

"Official business, Lieutenant?" Ann asked.

"Only semi-official, I'm afraid," he said. "You know we can't touch you. I'm just here to see you get upstairs safely. We think daytime killings are poor publicity."

"So do we," I said. "Why couldn't your escort service have begun at the boat?"

"It did. Some of my men were with you all the way."

We had the elevator to ourselves going up to the ninth floor. "Mrs. Panama," the lieutenant said, "this is off the record, of course, but why don't you just turn it over to me? You'd be doing society a service, you know. Or is the price too high?"

She gave him a level look. "I don't know what you're talking about. But just so *you'll* know, my late husband has told me he never did business with an honest man. Anything that could possibly happen to his former clients would be well deserved, you can be sure of that. Besides, in view of recent court rulings, I doubt if you could really do much of anything to them."

"You may be right," he said. "I wouldn't want to say. But I still wish you'd do it the right way."

She laughed. "From my viewpoint, I am."

Ryan left us at the door to the lawyer's suite of offices. Inside, Mr. Marko was waiting with a pride of feline-looking friends. He had the cold eyes and thin whiskers of a big cat himself, but he wore a \$300 suit and \$60 shoes. He looked chronically peeved as if his feet still hurt. His boys frisked me expertly. I never did get the gun back, but it was the one with the silencer and not mine, so I didn't care.

Marko got right to the point.

"Let's have it, Mrs. Panama. Now."

"First the check, please."

He knew we couldn't get out of there, so he nodded to his lawyer. Ann looked the check over and put it into her bag.

Marko couldn't contain himself. "I could swear you don't have it," he said. "All your things have been searched. No one was seen to pass it to you. I suppose this is one of Phil's ideas."

"That's right," she said, "Phil Panama dead is smarter than the lot of you alive. He knew there would be no way I could carry it without having somebody spot and take it. I haven't touched it or even seen it since he died."

Marko looked impressed. "You can deliver?"

"In three minutes time." She picked up a desk phone, called the number of the bank on the ground floor and asked for one of the officers by name. "This is Mrs. Ann Panama. You have my account. You also have in your vault a sealed registered-mail package with instructions to deliver it only in my presence. I'm coming right down to take delivery in your office. Yes, in just a minute or two. I'm upstairs."

Ann stood up and looked at Marko. "Phil always said the simplest way was best and safest. One bank held it till I sent instructions.

Then Uncle Sam delivered it for me. Come downstairs now, Mr. Marko, and take delivery."

Mr. Marko said something sulphurous in his mother tongue.

Ann laughed. "Phil said no one but an honest man would think of the U.S. Mail. Besides, it was perfectly safe. Even you couldn't hijack all the mail coming in for six months. Well, let's go downstairs and get it over."

We did just that.

Afterwards I drove her to the Miami Airport. She had an hour to wait before her flight to Switzerland took off, and we spent it in the cocktail lounge. I promised to forward her luggage from the boat. She gave me a check for thirty thousand dollars. I never questioned it. It was good.

"You were worth every cent of it, Johnny," she said. "For one thing you had camouflage value. If I hadn't had a bodyguard none of them would have taken me seriously. That's the way their minds work. Also I needed you in case of nuts or independent operators." She stopped and smiled at me. "Too, there were the fringe benefits."

I thought of the fringe benefits. "Will I see you again?"

"Who knows, Johnny?" She still smiled. "There were a few items Phil didn't put in the book. But don't call me. If I need you, I'll

call you. I'll know where you are."

"You aren't sorry for what Marko will do with the book?"

"A good question," she said. "No, I'm not sorry. They were corrupt, or eager to be corrupt, or Phil couldn't have dealt with any one of them. Marko is just another instrument of justice. I'm not even sorry about what he'll make out of all this."

It was almost time for her to go. I finished my cocktail, but I couldn't resist asking, "Just what do you mean by that?"

"It's a long story," she said seriously. "You could ask why I cared at all. I lived off the dollars other men's corruption brought Phil. I'm willing to live off Marko's money. In a sense, I'm responsible for what Marko does with the book, but I'm not sorry. I may be wrong, but I see only people getting what they richly deserve. I'm not even sure that I've done any favor for Marko. I think maybe he bought more than the book today. I think he may have bought Mr. Smith and his principals too. I wouldn't envy him that."

"Who is Mr. Smith?" I asked.

"I honestly don't know, Johnny. I'm not sure I want to know. It's an interesting question."

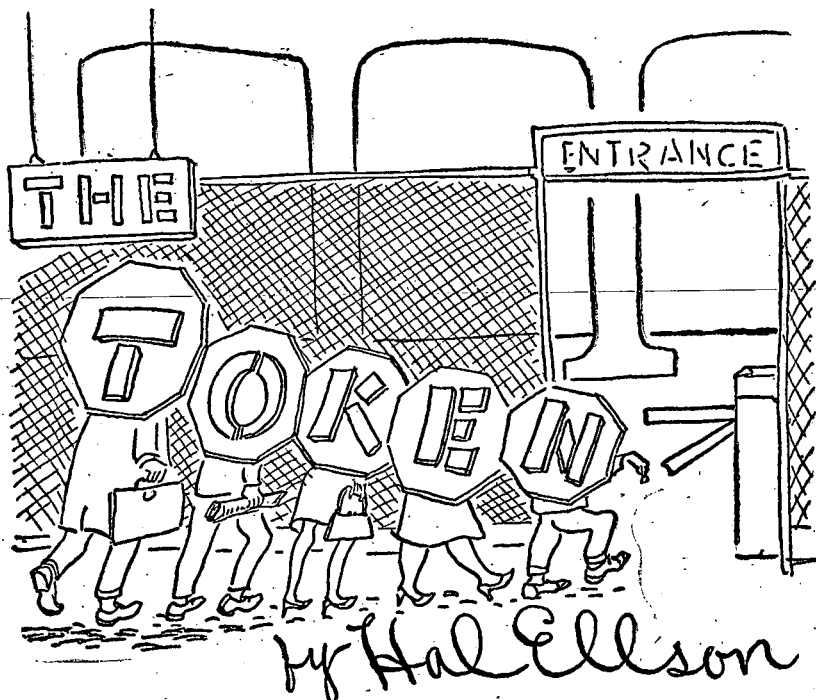
"Yes," I said. "It's an interesting question." Just then I didn't envy Mr. Marko at all.

There is security in routine, but man loves one and not the other.

EVERY MORNING at ten, no sooner, no later, Jones left the house and went off to work. On the corner he dropped a dime for the newspaper into the same dirty cigar box filled with coins at the same unpainted stand; the same bank on the opposite corner, flag hanging listless from its pole, sky above

it remote. Jones barely glanced at the sky, folded the paper under his arm and went down the subway steps.

He gave up a token for the turnstile; a convenience, easier to handle than money. Rot! The tiny brass piece was another gimmick designed to deceive the public, to



make the fare seem reasonable for a dirty, foul-aired trip through the underground. The token replaced the money and alleviated the pain.

The cost of living—well, you make it and they take it. We're all on the treadmill, Jones thought, shaking his head, and a rush of cold air entered the station, then the rumble of a train; the sound smothered his thoughts, rebellion died with brakes, wheels grinding to full-stop.

He stepped into the train. The doors closed behind him. *Holy to mercy, a seat.* He spread his paper and the train rumbled off. Once again he was one of the eight million of the city; he couldn't escape. Long, long ago he'd given up the thought. It was all routine now—breakfast, subway, paper, office and back again to the underground with his fellow token-carriers—routine which they no longer recognized as such, miserable slaves who didn't realize they were slaves. *Really the best kind; docile, stupid and hard-working.*

"For what?" said a voice, and Jones raised his eyes, the question so clear he was certain someone had spoken, but the others, screened behind their papers, were diligently weighing yesterday's dubious history. Wheels turning furiously, the train roared on. Jones went back to his paper; the dis-

turbing voice was silent. He spread-eagled the globe in print, the calamities of man: disturbances in Algeria, border incident in India, street riots in Iraq, a whole world seething in chaos.

He lifted his eyes, the rumbling of the train steady, drive unfaltering, passengers grimly quiet behind their papers. Nothing would stop them from reaching their destinations, no violence would intrude. *Bloody tokens,* thought Jones, *all of us.* It was the explicit sum of his revolt. He resumed reading, and the train raced on to his station.

He changed at Times Square, up the steps, into the shuttle, a brief ride across town; now the southbound local, two stations; always the same route, measured and timed to the second. He could do it with his eyes closed, without making a mistake.

Now, go through the turnstile and entry-door to the basement level of the skyscraper whose marble corridors and stairs led to the street. *A robot,* he thought. *Yes, always the same corridor, same stairway, same revolving exit-door and no disturbing deviation likely.* He entered the corridor. Light splintered off the marble, brass gleamed, a clock pointed the hour. No need to meet its numbered face; twenty of eleven exact.

Fifteen minutes to the office; he'd never failed to arrive, no matter how he felt. He was proud of that. "Don't you ever get sick?" his secretary once asked. Silly question. He'd smiled then; he didn't now. A distinct clicking sounded in the corridor. *Rhythm*



of castanets? Not here. Up ahead he spied the girl walking on impossibly high heels.

Perfect rhythm, good legs, nice body—his eyes feasted on her. Ahead, gleaming brass doors opened to another corridor. The girl went through. He knew ex-

actly which door she'd take. It was always the same one, then a left turn and up those stairs to vanish till tomorrow.

For a month now he'd watched her, wondering where she went, what she did. He could guess, but guessing was futile and agonizing. The agony started the moment she vanished on the stairs. Now the moment was due.

She pushed open the door, entered the next corridor, and turned left. The door closed. He moved faster. The glass panel gave back a reflection, but it was a stranger he saw and he was shocked. The shock passed. He pushed open the door to see the girl mounting the stairway. He stopped, saw her vanish. The moment had come, the terrible agony; this time he couldn't take it and he started after the girl.

Her heels tapped sharply on the marble steps. Hearing them, he moved faster, mounted the steps. By this time she was out of the building. He pushed through the revolving door, stepped out onto the crowded avenue. A light rain was falling, traffic swishing on slicked asphalt. The girl was already at the corner, almost running.

Late for work, he thought, following. The lights changed. He had to wait, keeping the girl in

sight. Down a side street she went, away from the dreary shadows of office buildings. Two blocks farther on she turned, entered a renovated brownstone.

Jones was completely unprepared for this. Stunned, he returned to the avenue. It was exactly eleven o'clock when he entered his office, not late, but a deviation from rigid routine; a matter of five minutes, which caused his secretary to look up in surprise. "I thought you were sick and not coming in," she remarked.

He shook his head, but he was sick—sick, foolish and stupid for following the girl, for veering off-course. Only five minutes in twenty years—it shouldn't have bothered him but did.

The rest of the day was a mess. Nothing went right. He kept thinking of the girl, the renovated brownstone. A place of rendezvous?

At five he left the office, a sick man merely because he'd turned left in the corridor that morning. Deadlly sick—he was sure of that.

At six he arrived home. Dinner awaited him; he had no appetite, but he knew Cora too well by now. He ate. She noticed nothing wrong.

Leaving the table, he went directly to the livingroom, to the evening paper, and absolute con-

fusion; impossible to read. It didn't matter. He had to put on a show for Cora.

Soon the dishes stopped clattering in the kitchen, the light went out. Cora entered the livingroom, went directly to the television set, put it on and retired to her special chair. Come hell, high-water and revolution, she would neither budge from there nor brook a word of conversation in the next three hours.

Nine years like that; an insufferable sentence. Jones peered over his paper at her, saw her as a wax figure in an electric chair. *A living corpse*, he thought, and suddenly the urge took him to shout, stamp, smash the furniture!

A wild fantasy! He did nothing of the sort. The clock ticked off the minutes, images unreeled on the screen. This now was the sum of his life: dancers and cowboys, detectives and violent lady wrestlers, a legacy for all the robots like himself swarming upon the continent.

The set went off at ten. Cora mounted the stairs. The evening, which had never begun, was at an end. "Don't forget to put out the light," Cora warned from the top of the stairs.

Voice of emancipated woman, voice of waspish authority, voice of the compleat tyrant, it floated

down, echoed in the livingroom. As if he ever forgot. As if she'd ever let him.

Like a beggar he followed her up the stairs and switched off the light. The bedroom was dark when he entered it, Cora in bed. Quickly he followed her in. Her feet were like chunks of ice; no surprise there. Later, he dreamed of the girl, the brownstone house, and groaned in his sleep.

Cora complained in the morning. Guilty, he had nothing to say, drank his juice, ate his eggs and glanced at his watch: time to leave.

He left the house, bought his paper, entered the subway and was carried off to Manhattan with his fellows. They didn't notice him, he took no notice of them, the morning paper enough. Looking up again, he found himself at his station. He made the usual changes, a routine no different from any other morning till he reached the marble corridor.

Now came the challenge, the test of his metre, for there was the girl again, walking ahead, high heels spiking frozen marble. He had no intention of following her. Yesterday's foolishness was done with.

The girl passed through the glass door, turned left, and now the glass, swinging backward, mirrored the stranger's image again. Gasping, he almost halted, then

pushed open the door and was caught, taken by the same vacuous impulse which had moved him yesterday. He turned left, heard the girl mounting the stairs.

He followed, and the pattern was the same as the previous day. She hurried, as if late for work, taking the same route to the renovated brownstone where once more she vanished.

He stood outside, gaped at the door for some minutes, then a curtain moved and he saw her at a window. She smiled down at him and nodded.

A nod, a smile and the whole city quaked, clocks stopped and a man became a man once more, and so he was late for work that morning; and late the following morning. Friday he begged the girl for a lock of her auburn hair. She refused him; he persisted. He wanted it as a token, and this amused her. She finally gave it to him.

The weekend disrupted the alliance. He went to church with Cora and took her to her mother's, a horrible visit saved by his thoughts of the redhead. He'd made up his mind about her. Monday morning he saw her again. When it was time for him to leave, he told her he was staying and the reason why.

The girl was stunned. She stared

at him, then smiled and said, "Stop kidding. Now run along. I expect to be very busy today."

"Busy?"

He didn't understand. She explained quite bluntly. A few minutes later he left the house and was late for work again. This time the boss came in to see him and noticed his deathly pallor.

"Better take a few days off," he suggested. "You're coming down with something."

"No, I'm all right. Just a bit of indigestion," Jones explained. "I'll not be late again."

The next morning he was as good as his word. At ten he dropped his token in the slot and stepped on the subway platform. The morning paper was tucked beneath his arm. He opened it on the train, the usual stuff: war,

threats of war, flood, famine and the inevitable daily murder, the human condition in a nutshell.

At midtown he left the train, shuttled east, located south, and walked the marble corridor toward the door that led to the stairs. The glass panel gave back his own reflection this time. He wasn't surprised. The door swung to when he pushed it.

He turned right, mounted the stairs to the street, paused at the corner to drop his paper in a waste-can and stopped his hand. There it was again, a photo of a girl, a redhead strangled in an eastside brownstone. Pretty creature, too young to die. He dropped the paper in the waste-can, then a lock of auburn hair, thinking, *It's not real. It's only a token*; and walked on to his office.

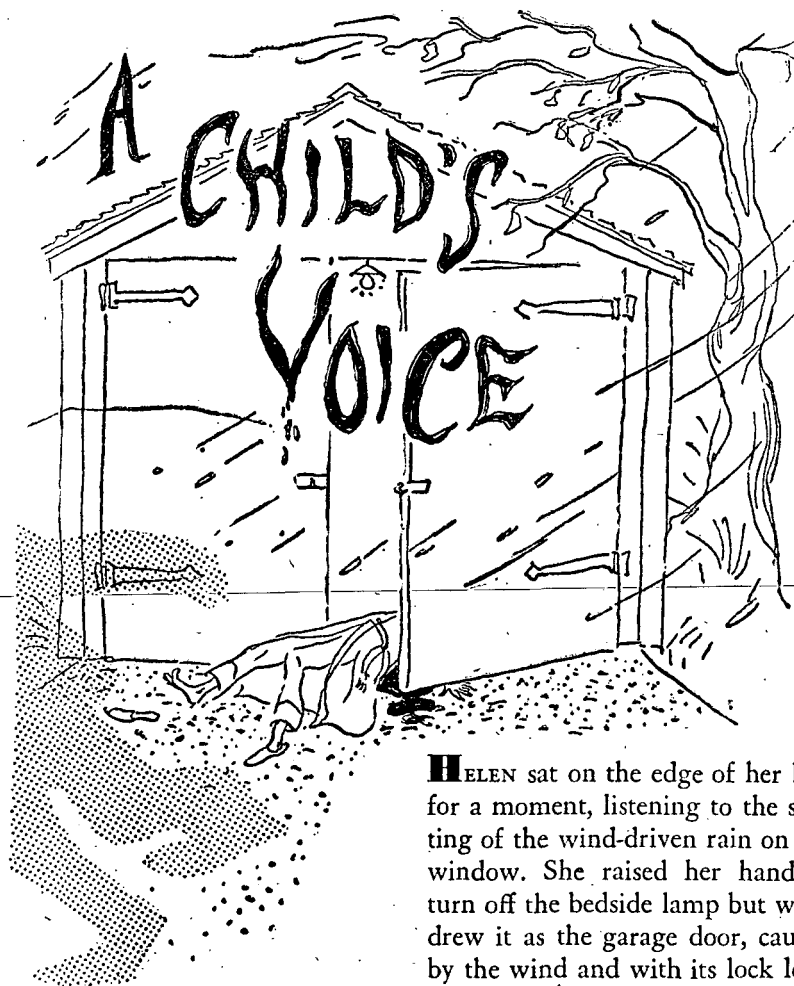
IF YOU PLAN TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

2441 BEACH COURT, RIVIERA BEACH, FLORIDA 33404

One's habits are recognizable as such, it seems, only as one strays from them.



HELEN sat on the edge of her bed for a moment, listening to the slatting of the wind-driven rain on the window. She raised her hand to turn off the bedside lamp but withdrew it as the garage door, caught by the wind and with its lock long broken, slammed loudly. It

slammed again and again, irregularly, and she sighed. There would be no sleep as long as that continued, so she stood up, a tall, rather handsome woman in her mid-thirties. Stretching into a robe, her thin pajamas strained to emphasize a well-formed figure.

She left the house through the kitchen, leaving the door ajar, but at the foot of the porch stairs hesitated at the downpour. If only her husband were home to do this chore! Then, steeling herself, she ran the few paces across the narrow walkway to the garage. The cold drops penetrated the light garments, and she was shivering as she groped for the switch, flicked it.

Turning to look for a brace, the



scream she attempted died, with her, before it could turn into sound.

In the small village, and in all of his nearly thirty years as Chief of Police, Andrew Scott had never been confronted by a major crime.

Now, he stood beside the workbench in the garage and considered his course. With nothing but Police Academy lectures to guide him, and those from his early youth, maybe he should pass this one. He could, he knew, borrow a homicide man from the city. He wavered, then decided he would go as far as possible with his seven-man force and would call for help only if their investigation failed.

Leaning over the workbench to examine a two-foot length of bloodied metal pipe, he studied it, without touching, in the light from the two flimsily-curtained windows above the bench. One end of the pipe, apparently used for grasping, had been roughly cut and there was blood on that end also. Scott turned to the uniformed man at the end of the bench, who was working delicately with brushes, powders and sprays.

"When you're finished, Carl, get that pipe to the city Police Lab. Ask them for blood types—both ends."

The other nodded, and Scott turned to the door. This was the last of the preliminary work. The victim had been identified as one Helen Barnett, housewife. Her husband, Henry, was in Grove City a hundred miles to the south, and a call had been made to the Grove City police. A photographer

had come and gone, and the doctor had left to follow the ambulance to its destination.

Outside, Scott beckoned to the young patrolman who, notebook in hand, was descending the steps of a house directly opposite. The patrolman answered Scott's unspoken inquiry. "Halfway on both sides of the street and all negative so far, Andy."

The Chief scowled. "I was afraid that would be the case, but keep going, Dave. Check with the people in the houses in back, too, then report in. I'll be at the office."

At a sound from behind them, the two turned. A man and a woman were leaving the house next to the garage, the woman carrying a small dog. As Dave and Scott walked over to question the couple, the man's voice boomed, "I'm Dan Fortman, gentlemen. This is my wife, Myra. We've been watching your squad cars and the ambulance, as most of the neighbors have. What happened?"

Scott introduced himself, nodded toward Dave. "Officer Fine," he said. "Mrs. Barnett is dead. Did either of you notice anything unusual last night?"

Fortman whistled. "Dead? That's terrible, and a real loss. She added a lot to the scenery around here, if you know what I mean. A dish." The big voice carried such a

note of relish that Scott could almost see the man lick his lips.

"She was murdered," Scott said. "How well did you know her?"

Shocked, Fortman hesitated. "Murdered!" he repeated.

The woman moved slightly in front of him. "Not well, at all," she snapped. "She was not our kind of people. Her husband traveled most of the time, and she wandered around in practically nothing at all, throwing herself at every man around. It's a wonder to me that nothing has happened before this." Thin lips snapped shut to a thin line.

"'Every man', Mrs. Fortman? Do you know the names of these men?"

"I'll be honest, Chief Scott. I've never actually seen anyone there; but I know what I know, and no woman's husband was safe with her around. But I'm afraid we can't help you. Our bedrooms are on the other side and we wouldn't have heard anything."

The shrill, penetrating voice quiet, Fortman broke in. "Anything else? If not, we've just got to walk the dog. Bootsie has a very set routine."

They turned away at Scott's negative gesture, but Fortman's so-masculine voice came over his shoulder. "Maybe Myra's right about her, Chief. I wouldn't know from

personal experience, worse luck, but her husband hollered a lot at her. Maybe he knew, too."

Scott stared after the oddly matched couple. The man was short, strongly built, handsome. He was meticulously groomed, from carefully parted hair to glossy shoes. She was inches the taller, thin and angular. Her lifeless hair was gathered haphazardly under a scarf and her only makeup was obviously yesterday's lipstick. Several inches of nightgown sagged below a wrinkled, stained coat. Run-down slippers clattered loosely as the couple moved away.

Scott mused on other peculiar matches he had known as he crossed town to the Police Building. There, the day-man informed him that Grove City had located Henry Barnett, had notified him of the tragedy and that Barnett was now on his way home. Scott nodded, wishing he could have been there to observe Barnett's reaction to the news.

In his own private cubby-hole, he became busy with the paperwork to which a small-town police chief must attend personally but, in the midst of this, he was interrupted by the entrance of the patrolman, Dave.

"The rest of the neighbors saw nothing, heard nothing, but they all give Mrs. Barnett a pretty clean

bill of health. Wore kind of short shorts, but only around her own yard. Maybe only the Fortmans saw anything going on. I've got a couple of people outside, Andy. Tommy Hoffman and his mother. Some of the neighbors told me about him. Not quite bright and hung around the Barnett garage at all hours. Lives in the next block, so I went over and picked him up and his mother insisted on coming along. Shall I bring them in?"

Scott nodded, and rose a moment later to greet the couple, ushered in by Dave. The woman was small, colorless, with deep lines in her thin face. But the youth—Scott was glad that Dave was here, too—was huge in every physical aspect, taller, heavier and stronger than either of the two men. The line of his short-cropped black hair almost met heavy eyebrows that stretched, unbroken, across the practically nonexistent forehead. The harsh face, set with small, beady eyes which flicked nervously from side to side, was a study in seeming malevolence.

Suddenly the youth grinned at Scott and bobbed his head. "H'lo," he said, dropped the cap he held in his hands, picked it up, fumbled and dropped it again.

Scott stared. The voice was a child's voice, high-pitched, trusting, and friendly. The savage ex-

pression had vanished as the smile came and Scott could almost feel the simple, wanting-to-be-liked nature behind that grin.

"This is Mrs. Hoffman, Chief Scott. And Tommy." Dave's voice grew curiously quiet and gentle. "Tommy was a little afraid that we were going to hurt him but I told him nothing like that would happen."

"Of course not. Please sit down, Mrs. Hoffman." Scott smiled at the youth. "You too, Tommy. No one's going to hurt you. I promise. All I'm going to do is ask a few questions. And let Tommy answer, Mrs. Hoffman."

Scott sat at the desk, still smiling, but staring at the young man. How to reach inside the stunted mentality, how to avoid a retreat into that first-seen nature?

"Tommy, do you know Mrs. Barnett?"

The childlike grin remained while the head shook in denial.

"Sure you do, Tommy. She lives about a block away from you and you go over there a lot."

"Helen. She said to call her 'Helen'. I like her. She lets me make things in the garage and sometimes we have cocoa."

"Do you ever go over to the garage at night, Tommy? Last night, maybe?"

"Sometimes. I don't remember."

He reached for the cap that Dave had picked up and placed on the desk. Scott leaned across the desk and pointed a finger at the youth's hand.

"Tommy," he asked, "how did you cut your hand? And when?"

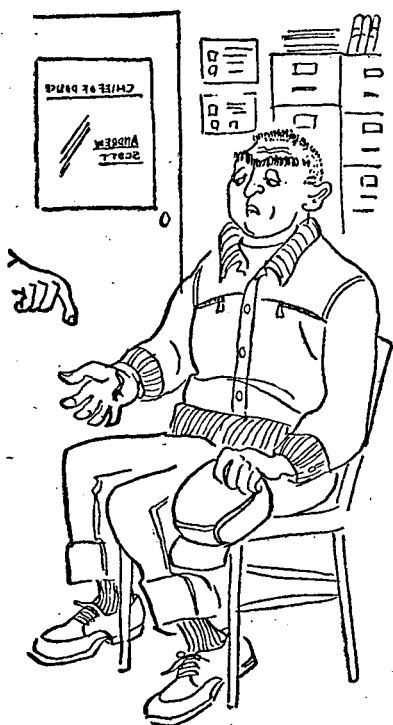
Tommy studied the torn flesh, still unhealed, of his right palm. Concentration erased the grin, drew the heavy brows down, brought the hard, black look back to his face. "I don't know," he said. "I climbed a tree in the park, maybe."

"Tommy, listen to me carefully." Scott was gentle but firm. "Listen to me. Helen was hurt last night. You liked her, but did you hurt her?"

The little eyes shifted, the huge hands twisted the little cap, and Tommy stood up. Dave softly moved a step nearer, a hand on the billy-club in his belt. Scott shook his head slightly, negatively. "Well, Tommy? Was it you who hurt Helen?"

The voice that answered was no longer childlike, but deep and assured. "I didn't hurt anybody, and I don't like it here." Then came an instant change to the high treble. "I want to go home."

"After a while, Tommy," Scott said, "but right now will you wait outside with Dave? I'd like to talk to your mother for a little bit."



Surprisingly, the youth turned and docilely walked out with the astonished Dave.

Scott turned to the woman. "Tell me about your son, Mrs. Hoffman. I know that he is retarded, but how serious is it? How old is he, by the way?"

"Tommy is nineteen, Chief Scott, but only five or six, mentally." Her voice was tired, patient, as though she had been through this many times. "My husband is dead and Tommy is all I have.

Maybe I should have placed him in a home, but I just couldn't. Specialists have assured me that he is harmless and I've never known him to be mean. The schools for the retarded, where he has been from time to time, also tell me that he's always gentle. Your officer told me what has happened and I tell you, Chief Scott; that my Tommy simply couldn't have done it."

She dabbed at tear-filled eyes and Scott waited in silence until she had replaced her handkerchief. "Mrs. Hoffman, does Tommy go out in the evenings? Was he out last night?"

She caught her breath, held it, exhaled in a deep sigh. The tears started again but she made no move to check them. "I can't stop him, can I?" Her voice faded until Scott could scarcely hear the words. "He was out late last night, in all that rain. I don't know where."

Scott stood up. "I know you believe in your son, Mrs. Hoffman, but I know nothing about cases such as his. You'll understand, I'm sure, that I must hold him here for a while. What I'd like to do, is to have a competent doctor talk to Tommy and see if he can get your boy to talk. We'll take good care of him and you can see him whenever you like. Would you agree to this?"

She nodded, dumbly, rose and walked to the door where she turned. "Like you, I must know the truth. I'll just say goodbye to Tommy and tell him to go with the officer. But could I perhaps come to see him later, Chief Scott? Maybe this evening?"

Scott walked over to the door, touched her arm. "Of course, Mrs. Hoffman, and thank you." He looked over her shoulder. "Dave, he said, "Tommy is going to stay with us. Get his prints. And his mother may visit him at any time."

Scott went back to his desk and to thoughts of Tommy. Would he have snatched up the pipe to use as a weapon? Or would he simply have used his big hands, his tremendous muscles, to kill? 'Gentle, and never mean.' Perhaps, but his mental development had ceased at the age of five or six and Scott had seen, many times, the tantrums, the fits of rage that had suddenly possessed children.

A later talk with Tommy left Scott as uninformed as before. Tommy was polite, but Scott could elicit nothing that bore on the murder. He sent the youth back to his cell and reached for the photographs to resume his fruitless study of them, but was interrupted.

"I'm Henry Barnett, Chief Scott. Tell me, what happened? How could it have happened? I just

can't bring myself to believe it!"

There was strain and anguish in his voice, and Scott looked up to study the speaker, a tall, heavily built man, well-dressed but with necktie askew. Hatless, his greying hair emphasized his florid features. He was breathing hard. At Scott's invitation he sank into a chair, holding his head in shaking hands as the chief told him of the event as he had reconstructed it.

Barnett was still for a few moments after the story, then suddenly leaped to his feet. His eyes glittered and his red face purpled, bringing to light a thin scar running from ear to nose. His voice was loud and hard. "That crazy kid I just saw out there! He did it! I told Helen a thousand times not to let him hang around. You should have put him away a long time ago!"

He had half-turned, pointing at the open door, and Scott noted the smear of blood on the man's jaw. "Cut yourself?" he asked.

Barnett stared at him for a moment, wiped his face with a handkerchief. He looked at the red smudge on the cloth, started, and turned his hand over. He dabbed at the inner side of his wrist, where it met the palm.

"Nothing," he said. He was quite calm, now. "Jabbed myself trying to get some gum off my

shoe. But what about Helen? Where is she now? What must I do?"

"Nothing you 'must' do, Mr. Barnett, except to look after—" Scott hesitated, then continued, "—your personal affairs. We had your wife taken to the Clinic first, but she will be at the funeral parlor soon so why don't you go over there and make arrangements. I've got a number of questions to ask you but they can wait."

He watched the stricken man slowly get to his feet and walk, almost painfully, across the room, then stopped him. "Oh, just one thing, Mr. Barnett. Would you mind giving us your fingerprints? There are all kinds of prints in your garage and we'd like to eliminate as many as we can."

He approached Barnett and led the man along a narrow corridor where he opened a door.

"This is Mr. Barnett, Officer Koenig. Mr. Barnett has offered his prints, Carl, to help us in the identification of those you found in the garage. After that you might drive him home," thus delicately informing Carl that Barnett was a free man, "unless you have your car here, Mr. Barnett."

Barnett shook his head. "I've got my car, Chief Scott, but thanks anyway. Call me when you want to ask those questions."

Seated again at his desk, Scott considered Henry Barnett. Shock and grief had been written plainly on this man's face but maybe this had been carefully rehearsed. He did flare up mighty fast. Maybe he had met another woman and wanted his wife out of the way.

On the other hand, maybe it had been Tommy, in a sudden tantrum.

It was late in the day when Chief Burmeister, of Grove City, telephoned and Scott, glancing at the clock, was startled by the hour. Somewhere the day had passed—a call from the doctor verifying the cause of death and fixing the time as one to two hours before midnight, telephone calls from the city papers asking for details, visitors.

"Sorry to take so long, Andy, but on a hunch we located and talked to the night manager and the night porter at the motel. Barnett took the news hard and I would have gambled that he was clear, but he's got a mighty low boiling point so there's always a possibility. It's not a long drive from Grove City and both the manager and the porter say he was gone from before nine until after midnight.

"Maybe here's a motive, Andy. Barnett got around some. According to the motel people, he got quite a few calls from women, one

in particular. The night manager said she had come to the office a couple of times—he recognized her voice—and he'd know her if he saw her again. That's about it."

"Okay, Jerry, thanks. I may have to call you for some more help but I guess I've got enough now to ask Barnett some embarrassing questions."

Scott walked down the corridor, put his head into a room. "How's the fingerprint business, Carl?" he asked.

"About another hour, Andy. I suppose you want everything tonight but I just remembered that I didn't have any lunch today."

Scott looked at his watch. "Neither did I, Carl. Let's get a bite at the Grill, then come back and finish."

Carl's estimate had been a little optimistic and it was nearing ten o'clock when he appeared in the chief's office. Scott pushed aside the papers on which he had been working and looked up.

"All classified, labeled and located, Andy. Mrs. Barnett's prints are on the car, door frames and a couple of other places. Barnett's are all over the place. Tommy Hoffman's prints are there, and a few others that don't belong to anybody we know. I'll send them to Washington for possible identification. But, sorry, there were no

good prints on that length of pipe."

Scott nodded. "I was afraid of that. Get those unknowns on the way to Washington." Carl yawned and Scott added, "Tomorrow. It's been a long day, Carl, so you can close up for the night."

Carl sighed. "Thanks, Andy. I'll just straighten out my things a little and then I'll leave. Good-night."

Scott scowled at the notes Carl had left. Unidentified fingerprints—maybe it was neither Barnett nor Tommy. Maybe, but let's drive out and talk to Henry.

Lights were burning throughout the house and Barnett had parked his car in front. Scott nodded in understanding of a reluctance on the part of Barnett to enter the garage and pulled his own car to a stop past the driveway, in front of the house next door. He climbed from the car just as a man descended the stairs with a small dog on a leash. The man hesitated, peering through the darkness at the figure in uniform.

"Chief Scott," the voice boomed recognition. "Back again, hey? Getting anywhere? Anything I can do? Just taking Bootsie out for her evening walk."

"Good evening, Mr. Fortman." He reached down to scratch the dog's ears. "No, nothing, thanks. You just go ahead and walk the dog. Mr. Barnett is home and I'm

just stopping to talk with him for a while."

"Oh." Fortman turned away, as the dog pulled at the leash. "I'd better get going. Bootsie doesn't like her routine to be interrupted. But if there is anything, just let me know. 'Night."

Scott watched them stroll away. Suddenly he stiffened. The dog was making a determined effort to turn into the Barnett driveway, Fortman tugging at the leash.

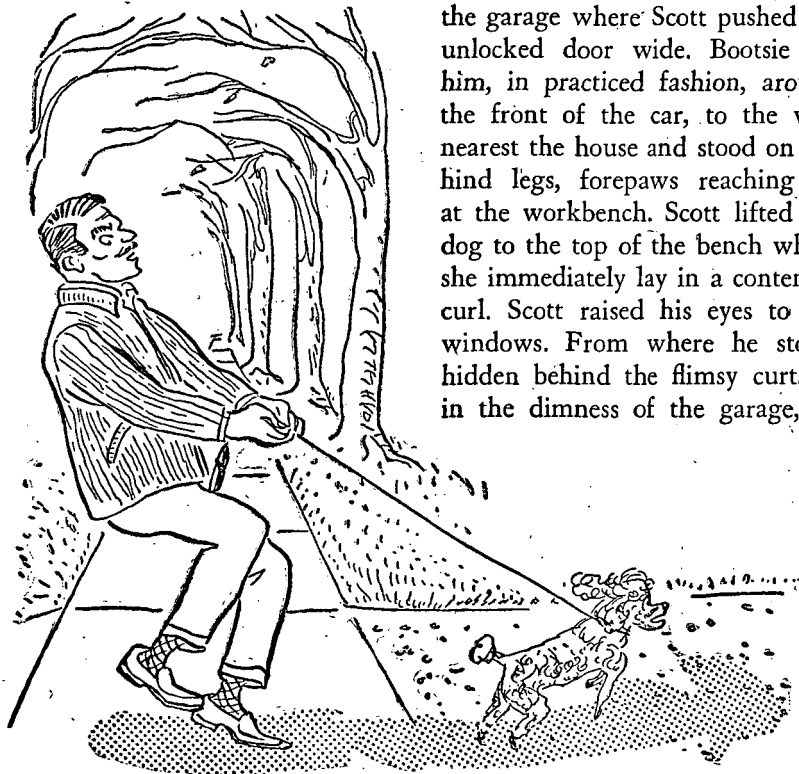
"Mr. Fortman," he called, and

the man stopped. Scott walked to him. "Your Bootsie seems to want to turn in here pretty badly. Is that part of her routine?"

"Cat, maybe." Fortman's deep voice had an added raspiness. "Maybe she's got the scent of what happened last night."

"Maybe," Scott said, and took the end of the leash from fingers that offered no resistance. "Let's try something."

He let the dog have her head and she moved unhesitatingly to the garage where Scott pushed the unlocked door wide. Bootsie led him, in practiced fashion, around the front of the car, to the wall nearest the house and stood on her hind legs, forepaws reaching up at the workbench. Scott lifted the dog to the top of the bench where she immediately lay in a contented curl. Scott raised his eyes to the windows. From where he stood, hidden behind the flimsy curtains in the dimness of the garage, he



had a clear view of nearly the entire bedroom through its windows directly opposite.

Fortman was still standing where the chief had left him. He started to speak, hesitated, and changed his mind as Scott stalked past him, face set grimly. Reaching his car, Scott opened the front door and jabbed at the microphone control. Reaching the night-duty man, he gave instructions.

"If Carl is still there, tell him to wait. If he's gone, get him back in a hurry."

He picked up the dog and turned to her owner. "Fortman," he called, "get in here."

The man walked to the car with stiff, mechanical steps. "What did you say, Chief Scott?" The voice was still deep, but now carried a curious note—of fear?

"You know what I said. Get in the car and stay there. I'll take your dog home, and if you move while I'm gone, I'll consider you a fugitive. You're under arrest!"

He watched the unresisting man seat himself, started away with the dog, then stepped into the street beside the domed car which had come to a stop beside his own. He thrust the dog through the opened window. "Here, Dave. Return Bootsie to Mrs. Fortman, next door to the Barnett house. Tell her I've taken her husband in for question-

ing. That's all she has to know."

"Fortman is mixed up in the killing, Andy?" Dave was eager for information.

"Up to his neck. I'm arresting him on suspicion, but I'm certain he's our boy."

At the Police Building, the night-duty officer greeted him. "Carl's here," he said. "Hadden't left yet, when you called in."

"I'll call him when I want him." Scott prodded his prisoner into his own office, pausing only to nod an "OK" to Mrs. Hoffman who had requested permission to see Tommy.

Inside his office, seated at his desk, Scott pointed at a chair. "Sit there, Fortman." He did not dignify prisoners with titles. "If you're innocent, you'll be glad to answer questions. Now, what was with you and Mrs. Barnett?"

Fortman started to speak, gasped and cleared his throat. His eyes shifted nervously and he cleared his throat a second time. Scott pointed to the water cooler and Fortman stumbled to it and drained a full glass without a pause. Returning to his seat, he said, "There was nothing between us." His voice was forced, almost shrill compared to its earlier quality. "I hardly knew the woman, Chief. I swear!"

Scott raised his voice, "Carl," and

the officer appeared in the doorway almost instantly. "That glass on the water cooler. Check those prints against the unknowns. Fast!"

He turned again to the man sitting stiffly on the edge of the hard guest chair, stared at him silently for a full five minutes, then spoke. "You swear, you said. Now I'm going to tell you what I think! You take your dog for a walk every night, and I think that your walk would end in the Barnett garage any night that you were sure Barnett was away. You said, yourself, that Mrs. Barnett was 'a dish', but that you had no personal experience with her. I think that you tried to satisfy your frustrated desires by turning into a Peeping Tom. I think Mrs. Barnett heard you. Maybe you knocked a length of pipe off the workbench. I think she came out to the garage to investigate and surprised you in your peeping, and I think you went into a panic and killed her! Now, what do you swear?"

Fortman's hands had gradually clenched into fists during the harsh, driving accusation and he opened them with effort. He took a meticulously folded handkerchief from his jacket pocket, wiped his beaded face, and crammed the cloth back into the pocket. He was about to speak when Carl poked

his head in the room. "Got an absolute match on one, Andy. I'll work on the others."

Scott nodded, turned to Fortman. "Your fingerprints are in the Barnett garage. Well?"

The man covered his face with his hands, sank low in the chair. "What have I done?" It was as if he were asking himself the question and could think of no answer that might carry hope. He uncovered his face but did not lift his head. "I'll admit to being a Peeping Tom, Chief." His voice was low, controlled. "It started accidentally but, like a stupid fool, I let it grow into a habit. I guess I didn't try too hard to stop it. But, Chief, I didn't kill her! I swear I have never even touched her!"

Scott reached across the desk, grasped the man's hands and turned them over. Palms and wrists were unmarked.

"Daniel! What are they doing to you?" Mrs. Fortman, arriving in a clatter of loose slippers, stood behind Fortman, draped her hands protectively over his shoulders.

"Nothing at all, Myra." He pulled away, slightly, from her touch. "I'll be all right. You shouldn't have come here."

Scott broke in. "Your husband is under arrest and is being questioned. You'll have to wait outside, Mrs. Fortman."

The thin, angular face grew grim and harsh, the lips set in a thin hard line. After a moment they opened and the strident voice declared war. "My place is here, with my Daniel. I will not stay outside while you torture him. I shall stay here and stop you!" She pulled a chair forward, in front of her husband, and glared defiantly at Scott. She sat and turned to Fortman, touched his hand. "Don't worry, Daniel. I'll protect you from everybody."

Scott hesitated, trying to decide whether to allow her to remain or to have her removed. Movement just outside the door caught his eye and he walked to the opening.

Barnett, who had been talking to Mrs. Hoffman and Tommy, stepped forward. "You didn't call about those questions, so I thought I'd come over here. You know, Chief, I think you're barking up the wrong tree, with Tommy. I've been really thinking about him, for the first time. He would never hurt Helen."

Scott stared at the man. Was this more acting? He spoke gruffly to Barnett. "Never mind about Tommy. Let's talk about you. You were away from your motel for several hours last night. Where were you? And who is the woman you know over there?"

Barnett returned the stare. "What

are you driving at, Chief? I visited my sister yesterday evening. My mother lives with her and her husband in Grove City. Why?"

Scott shook his head. Barnett's explanation was undoubtedly true—too easy to check. Fortman it had to be—opportunity and motive were both present. It remained only to find proof or obtain confession. "Never mind, Mr. Barnett," he said. "No questions now. You go on home and I'll get in touch if anything comes up."

"Thanks, Chief, but I'll just wait around outside here, if I may. Mrs. Hoffman has no car and I told her I'd drive her home."

"Drive them both home, Mr. Barnett." Scott raised his voice, "Mrs. Hoffman, take Tommy with you. I don't think I need to hold him any longer. But keep him close to home, if you can, for the next several days."

He walked heavily back to his desk where he sank into his chair to face the downcast Fortman and the glaringly defiant Mrs. Fortman. He leaned forward, picked up a pencil, doodled on a pad for a moment, then spoke.

"All right, Mrs. Fortman, you may remain temporarily. Now, Fortman, let's get started. You killed Mrs. Barnett. Tell it all, from the beginning."

"I did not kill her, Chief. I said

it before and I'll say it again. I did not kill Mrs. Barnett!"

"Tell him nothing more, Daniel." The shrill hard voice of Mrs. Fortman commanded. She turned on Scott. "You have no right to make accusations like that. My Daniel wouldn't hurt anyone. Now stop it!"

Silence for a moment while Scott counted slowly up to ten. Self-control returned, but her interference brought decision. This woman had to go!

"Good-night, Chief Scott." The childlike voice came from across the room and Scott looked up. Barnett and Mrs. Hoffman stood in the doorway and Tommy had stepped into the office. "Mother says I can go home now and that I should say 'good-night'. He grinned his child's wide smile at Scott and the Fortmans and bobbed his head.

"H'lo, Mrs. Fortman," he said. Then, with a child's desire to please by saying the right thing, he continued, "I hope Mr. Fortman's cold is better."

Fortman turned, his dismal

thoughts penetrated by the mention of his name. "I don't have a cold, kid."

"Mrs. Fortman said you had a cold, last night." Rebuffed by the harsh tone, Tommy sounded hurt. "I just asked if it was better, now."

"Never mind all that. I insist that you stop this nonsense, Chief Scott, and let Daniel go or I shall demand a lawyer."

Scott held up his hand. "In a minute, Mrs. Fortman, in a minute." He turned back to the youth. "Tommy, think hard, and then tell me. Just when was it that Mrs. Fortman told you that Mr. Fortman had a cold?"

Fortman again covered his face with his hands as the clear, child's voice came from this giant. "Last night, when she came out of Helen's garage. She said she had to take the dog for a walk because Mr. Fortman had a cold and couldn't go out in the rain. And she cut her hand, just like I did when I was climbing a tree." He paused and giggled. "Were you climbing a tree, too, Mrs. Fortman?"



To advance a platitude here might be construed as "compounding a felony."

THE DEATH of me

By

Margaret E. Brown



You know, Father, the most irritating thing about all tired, worn-out, cliché-ridden platitudes and moralistic aphorisms is that they're so infuriatingly, smugly true: haste does make waste; a stitch in time will save nine; and Myrtle, a walking cliché . . . well, Myrtle was right, too.

"Cigarettes will be the death of you," she nagged whenever she had exhausted my other faults. "Not to mention me. Always smelling up the house with those filthy things, leaving ashtrays to be washed and ashes all over the furniture and rugs."

She left magazines in conspicu-

ous places, opened to articles ringed in red which expounded on nicotine-linked diseases or the dangers of smoking in bed; and she took great relish in reading aloud obituaries in which lung cancer was the cause of death.

"You could stop if you tried. It's just simple mind over matter," she'd harangue.

When I had the temerity once to point out that *her* mind wasn't so hot at controlling her own corpulent matter, she flared indignantly, "You know I'm a glandular case. I can't help it if a slight heaviness runs in my family. And don't try to change the subject. It's been proved that smoking takes years off a person's life. Do you think I want to spend my last years a widow?" The thought so depressed her that she consoled herself with another handful of chocolates.

I often wondered why Myrtle was so concerned about my life span. It wasn't as if she loved me; that was over before our first year of marriage, eighteen years ago. My insurance would more than keep her clothed, sheltered, and sated with chocolates, so perhaps she thought worrying about my longevity (or lack of it) was the proper wifely thing to do, or that she would genuinely miss my being around to nag.

Why did I stay with her? Habit, I guess. Too, she kept the house immaculate, cooked delicious meals, and was so fat that I didn't have to worry about unfaithfulness.

If she hadn't been such an obese harpy, I suppose we could have jogged along as happily as any other married couple, but she just wouldn't understand that I haven't the least desire to stop smoking. It's my one real enjoyment. We had no children, my job is boring, I don't make friends easily, and I have no hobbies except reading.

Do you smoke, Father? No? Then you don't know the pleasure of sipping a second cup of hot, black coffee after a good breakfast, the newspaper opened to an interesting editorial, as you strike a match to light your first cigarette of the day. That first whiff of sulfur as the match flares and catches the end of the cigarette—what perfume to a smoker's nose! A few tentative puffs to get it going, then you inhale deeply and your whole body relaxes. At work, it eases the pressures, helps you concentrate; at night, it's soothing to sit in an easy chair with a book in your lap watching the transparent ribbon of smoke curl and undulate upward in thin blue swirls. With a cigarette in my hand I could even shut

out Myrtle's droning complaints, as she was well aware.

I must have ignored her once too often because last winter she really became determined to make me quit. Until then, she'd only sniped at me; now it became serious guerrilla warfare. She began to keep the ashtrays in the kitchen on the pretext that she'd just washed them and hadn't gotten around to putting them back in the livingroom, forcing me to go hunting for one. She kept "forgetting," where she'd put the matches, and disavowed any knowledge of the disappearance of the last two or three packs in each carton.

"Am I to blame if you're smoking so much you can't keep track of how many packs you have?" she would ask with an injured expression.

So I began secreting them around the house, and as quickly as Myrtle would find one hiding place, I'd discover a different one. It became almost a game. My best cache was in the box of dietetic cookies she once bought in the vague hope of reducing. She never did find that particular place.

I don't know how long we'd have kept up that cat-and-mouse farce if I hadn't broken my leg while standing on a rickety stepstool to reach a pack of cigarettes hidden on the top shelf of the

linen closet behind some blankets.

The crash brought Myrtle waddling upstairs and, as the pain closed in on me, I heard her half-satisfied wail, "I told you cigarettes were going to be the death of you!"

When I came to, I was lying in bed and Dr. Mason was putting the final touches on a very heavy plaster cast. "A few weeks in bed, a month or two on crutches and



you'll be good as new," he told me cheerfully. "It's just a simple fracture and you're lucky it was your leg and not your neck. I'll check in on you in a few days."

Then he was gone—my last link with the outside world. Still dazed and groggy, I didn't realize what it meant until Myrtle brought me my breakfast tray the next morning.

"It was delicious," I told her

truthfully, reaching for a new book by one of my favorite authors which she had picked up from the library for me. I actually felt a wave of affection for her, Father.

"You're really a very good wife in many ways, my dear," I said appreciatively, indicating the breakfast tray, the steaming coffee, the book, my fresh pajama shirt. "I know it's going to be a lot of extra work for you."

Myrtle stood by the door, smiling, silent, while I opened the book and fumbled for cigarettes on the night table. Realizing they were missing, I met Myrtle's exultant eyes.

"This is no time for fun and games," I told her quietly. "Bring me my cigarettes."

"No!" she cried triumphantly. "Haven't you learned anything from that fall? What caused it? Cigarettes!"

"I fell because you made me resort to hiding them," I yelled back. "I should have slapped you down the first time you took them!"

"You would hit me, would you?" She leaned over the foot of the bed and shook a thick finger at me, her face mottled with rage. "You listen to me! I'll cook for you, I'll fetch and carry, I'll try to make you comfortable, but I will

not give you cigarettes!" Smoothing her dress down over her non-existent waist, she added, "I just can't be a party to your getting lung cancer and now is a perfect time to quit."

She collected the dishes, lumbered out of the room, and that was that. Neither pleading nor cursing moved her. She was as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar which she so much resembled; and on the issue of cigarettes, she would not be budged. After that first day, pride kept me from trying.

If only I had broken something less handicapping than a leg!

True to her word, Myrtle did make me as comfortable as possible. She lugged the portable television up from the den, kept me supplied with books and magazines and served new delicacies, but the sheer physical craving for cigarettes gnawed at my nerve ends, and everything reminded me of them.

I'd never realized before how much television time is devoted to cigarette commercials. I would lie helpless and immobile, watching an actor demonstrate how enjoyable his brand was, and break out in envious sweat.

Every magazine carried at least a dozen ads for different forms of tobacco, and every chapter in ev-

ery book described a character puffing a cigarette "nervously," "disdainfully," "confidently," or "lazily," while I longed to puff one "avidly."

The next two days dragged though Myrtle kept refilling the dish of lemon drops with which she had replaced my ashtray. I munched and nibbled constantly but grew more and more irritable from the sudden withdrawal.

"You'll get over it and someday you'll thank me," said Myrtle complacently.

"Thank you! If I hold onto my sanity, I'll divorce you as soon as I'm on my feet again!"

Before, I'd felt nothing for her but indifference. Now she became the embodiment of all my frustrations.

On the fourth day, my pride shattered and I groveled before her. "Just one!" I pleaded. "How will one cigarette hurt me?"

"It'll get you right back where you were before," she panted, stooping heavily to pick up the papers I'd scattered on the floor beside my bed. "You don't realize it,

but you're over the worst part now."

She was so smugly self-righteous that I couldn't bear her any longer.

Without thinking, I swung my broken leg, and sixteen pounds of plaster cast smashed down on her bent head. Howling with pain and pent-up frustration, I hit her again and again even after she lay still. Finally, my leg throbbed so unbearably that I fainted.

The insistent peal of the doorbell brought me to, and then I heard Dr. Mason calling from the hallway, "Anybody home?"

My lawyer pleaded temporary insanity under mitigating circumstances; and although one is entitled to be judged by his peers, you'll never convince me that there were any smokers on my jury. Well, they do let you have a few last cigarettes on Death Row.

The most discouraging thing, though, Father, is how right Myrtle was. At least she's not around to say, "I told you so!"

Just a minute more, Guard; I haven't finished my cigarette yet.



Pressure, applied judiciously, can halt a hemorrhage; unleashed, it can precipitate a flood.



DON'T let anyone tell you that this Scotch boom is going to go on forever. *I* know it isn't. In fact nearly everybody in America who blends it, bottles it, or sells it knows that we simply can't go on importing millions of barrels of a liquor from a tiny island off the coast of Europe just because it can't be made anywhere else in the world.

Oh, yes, we make whisky in the U.S. Everybody knows that. It's darned good whisky, too. Don't try to tell *me* that a southern mash or a Kentucky single grain doesn't make life a lot easier for millions of fastidious Americans, but a Scotch malt whisky can't be made here. It simply can't be done. That's why—

PRESSURE

at a time when we're nearly colonizing the moon—it makes me mad to think that we have to get every single drop of the stuff from a country smaller than New York.

Don't ask me *why* this is. If anybody should know the answer, I should. I've been in the whisky business forty-odd years; I talk to whisky men all day in my New York office, at the bonding warehouses, at the brokers' places, in the U.S. grain distilleries, out in the field, in the bars, in saloons, at the dealers' places. I also discuss whiskey with my gardener on Long Island, my barber, my travel agent, Joe at the country club, my wife and anybody else who'll listen. Scotch is my business.

It's something to do with the water. Not even the water in the *lowlands* of Scotland will do. It *must* be water from a peaty, Highland river like the Spey or the Lochie or the Livet. It is also something to do with the barley they use; plump, Aberdeen or Angus or Banff barley is taken up every year by the Scottish distillers, whole harvests at a time. All the rest has something to do with the peat-fire they use under the still, the aromatic juices in the hot stills which haven't been cleaned out in 150 years, the temperature, the humidity, the skill of the stillmen who know exactly when to 'run

off', as it's called in the industry.

If there's anything else it must be witchcraft and, believe me, *that* wouldn't surprise me about the Scots.

All I get is the product; and all I know is that I have to import barrels and barrels of the stuff to make a living for about two thousand of my employees who work three shifts getting it on the market.

I want to tell you about a day last March when a grey-haired man called Ogilvie from our Scottish supplier phoned me from Glasgow. The conversation went something like this:

"Mr. Sullivan?"

"Yes."

"This is Hector Ogilvie. From Glasgow."

"Hello, Hector."

"I'm phoning you because I don't want to put any of this in writing."

"Oh?"

"You know Andrew Lamont?"

"I don't think so."

"Yes, you do. You met him at our Tomintoul distillery last summer. He was the tall man, about thirty; wore a white coat, black hair—"

"He had a blonde wife, good-looking girl?"

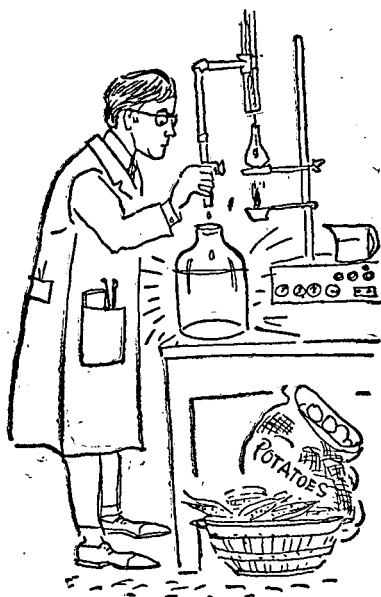
"That's him. He's our chemical engineer based at Glasgow. He was

at Tomintoul on a visit when you were there."

"What about him?"

I heard him breathe before he said, "He made ten gallons of Islay malt artificially last week."

It was a few seconds before I thought what to say. If it had been



anyone but Hector Ogilvie on the other end of that phone four thousand miles away, I would have made polite noises and hung up. But this was a *whisky* man talking. Ogilvie had been managing one of Charlie McIntyre's distilleries at Glenasky for years. I said, "It went back to raw alcohol."

"It didn't."

"Then it didn't hold the flavor."

"It did."

"It won't mature."

"It will."

I found my voice a little thicker.

"You're kidding."

"I am not. He's proved it out—many times."

"Who knows about it?"

"You. And me. And him."

"What about McIntyre?"

"He doesn't know. He wouldn't know what to do if he did. Lamont says the development's got to be done now in America. There isn't enough money here."

"What d'you want me to do?"

"Get Bailey and Green and Pudner lined up. I think I can bring Lamont over to New York next week for a test demonstration. He'll need a lab and three assistants."

"They'll take some convincing. So will I. We'll need to see long-term tests."

"You will also need a lot of money."

Well, they came over. I got the other three whisky men together and by the time Lamont had worked on the fourth test I had a feeling we had kissed goodbye to four hundred years of the Scotch whisky industry as we knew it. That meeting was supposed to last three hours and it lasted five days. We almost slept in the place. Lamont worked behind locked doors

but he showed us all we wanted to know. First he distilled a few pints from corn. Then he went on to coarser grains like maize. He finished up producing three gallons of the loveliest, peat-tanged, malt-flavored nectar we had ever tasted from a sack of Oklahoma potatoes. He matured it by electronics.

I don't know if you realize what I'm saying here but, to get the picture straight in your mind, it was as if somebody from Vienna had brought over a computer and composed, scored, and played music that suddenly put everyone who made music all over the world out of business overnight—opera organizers, orchestra leaders, recording artists, singers and musicians—finished.

That was the size of the problem we had at 4 a.m. on the eighteenth floor of the Tallamady Building in New York, and it wasn't nice. The next day we rushed in the specialists from the Midwest—men who *knew* whisky even better than we did—tasters, smellers, sniffers, blenders, who could tell precisely what kind of Orkney or Speyside would mix best with the sharp water of East San Francisco. They passed Andrew Lamont's product as one of the finest Glenlivet's they had ever tasted.

The potato reached a dizzy height in the history of the liquor

business that night, that's for sure.

At first everyone was too scared to talk money. I just kept walking the carpet and horse-talking about, "International consequences in the spirit trade . . . responsibilities far beyond the immediate profit incentives . . . a breakthrough in our industry as far-reaching as the atom bomb."

Ogilvie glared through his spectacles and said, "*Somebody's* got to get it started. The time to do it is here and now. Let's get something drawn up." He talked as if he were Lamont's theatrical agent.

Harold Bailey, a big whisky man from the West Coast, agreed with him. "To hell with this international consequences' jazz. Is this the United Nations? Let's sign them up now, at least with a provisional contract."

The other two whisky men, James Green and O. B. Pudner, kept silent. They looked scared out of their wits with the Scotsman's discovery. They knew this was the end of the Scotch trade.

All this time, Lamont just drew squiggles on a scratch pad and looked sad. Everybody knew what everybody else was thinking. This was Survival Day, and the men who signed up Lamont would make a fortune. Those who didn't were done.

We all started pushing Lamont

at once—provisional rights for six months, guaranteed exclusives for the first three years, outright payments, royalties, stock-sharing—and the more we pushed the sadder Lamont looked. I hoped he was just tired.

"Let's think about it," he said as he took off his white lab coat. "We've plenty of time."

Bailey got panicky. "Yeah, you do that, Andrew. You think about it, and while you're doing that, somebody in Germany or Japan will get on to the method in a month and sell the world out in a year."

He started packing up his things. "They won't get on to it. It took me eight years working night and day. This is no do-it-yourself whisky-water. It's complicated." He smiled before he left. "I want to think about it." His mouth was tight.

We nearly went mad. Think about what? What was he trying to do, hike the price into billions? Had he no sense of decency? Think about it!

Bailey and I kept talking to him all the way back to his hotel. Then I went down to the airport and tried again. "Just tell me why you want to delay, Andrew."

He leaned against a stair railing. "I'll try. What *is* Scotland, anyway? The top part of a small volcanic

hiccup off the coast of Europe; five million people. You could lose it in Los Angeles. We don't have much—a reputation for building ships, playing the bagpipes, and making tartan and whisky. That's about it, one way or another." He lit a cigarette. "Maybe we should keep the little we've got."

"Listen, Andrew, I know how you feel," I said, "but you can't keep back progress. You've found the way to mass-produce Scotch malt whisky anywhere in the world. This'll take money to develop, and a plant and men and materials. Let *me* develop it. I can raise the money—"

"Goodnight, Alex." He held out his hand.

I watched them walk to the runway for his plane. Hector Ogilvie was waving his arms at him and, from where I stood, looked as if he were swearing continuously at the thickest, most stupid chemical engineer in the whisky business.

I think I'd better tell you something about myself at this stage, then you'll know why I went straight back to my New York office that evening and did some very clear thinking. I'm fifty-two years of age, although I don't look it. My father was an Irish immigrant and my mother came from Liverpool in England. You'll pardon my inverted snobbery if I tell

you I came up the hard, hard way near the New York waterfront. And you'll pardon me if I leave out some of the years during prohibition; let's just say that's how I got into the liquor business. I married Kate Bergman in 1933, divorced her in 1939. I married again in 1942 and Lucy and I live on Long Island in a fine house with all the trimmings. Our boy Larry works with me in the business. He's sharp.

Don't press me for details; that's about the size and breadth of my life. Better people than you have tried to put a bite on me by digging up some early-Sullivan relics on that waterfront.

I sat in my office that night, and when all the anger and scare had left me I began to laugh. You know what this was, don't you? This was a Situation, and I hadn't had one of these in years. Business problems, yes; plenty of them. But something like this? Not since Ed Buccelli and I worked together had I got myself a Situation that had to be handled; managed; fixed.

I put together the facts. A young Scots chemical engineer had found a way of making Scotch malt whisky artificially from almost any kind of vegetable matter that would produce ethyl alcohol. If this development were launched anywhere in the world, Scotch

whisky would no longer be a monopoly of the Scots. It could be produced in the Gobi Desert from sagebrush! It needed money to develop it. I could get the money. If I had that patent, or the rights, I could make a fortune and put every other Scotch importer in the world out of business.

So, I had to have that patent or the know-how. That's me. Why should I try to tell *you* otherwise? D'you imagine I got to the top in the liquor business letting somebody *else* manipulate these things?

I picked up the telephone book and looked for "Buccelli". Ed was a good starting point.

The man who came to see me later that night on Long Island looked like a lawyer. He was of medium height, had black, wavy hair, nice brown eyes, and a broad face that smiled easily. His name was Daly, and he spoke with a Scottish accent.

I took him into the library and I poured drinks. "That was quick."

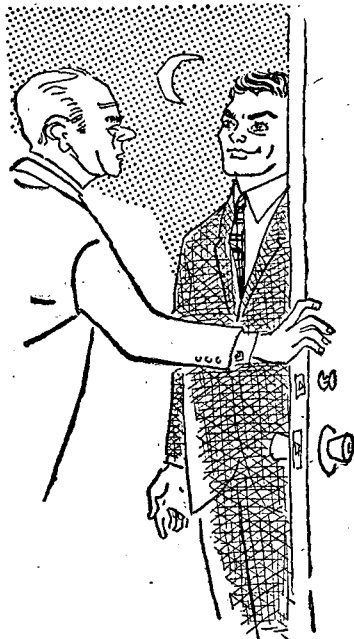
"Mr. Buccelli said you were in a hurry, Mr. Sullivan." He sat down in the big hide chair, and I noticed how well-cut was his dark-grey suit.

I sat on the sofa and hoped I looked younger than I felt with this thirty-odd-year-old, clean-cut, serene executive type. "Did he tell you anything about what I want?"

"Only that you had an assignment you wanted to talk over." He sat back.

I sipped my drink. "Are you on your own or with an organization?"

He brought out a wallet and



from it a card which he handed to me. It read:

Gascoine Peterson, Inc.
328 44th Street
New York, N. Y.
U.S.A.

I had to use my reading glasses. I said, "This doesn't tell me much."

"I'm not *selling* my company's services, Mr. Sullivan," He picked up his glass.

"That doesn't give me much encouragement to buy them."

"I'm not encouraging you." He took some whisky.

I sighed. This was not going to be easy. What was the world coming to? You ask for a pressure service and what do you get? You get a crease-panted young so-and-so sitting back drinking your whisky, not giving a damn whether he wanted your work or not. In the old days—well, times have changed. I said, "Let me tell you the story."

I told him about Lamont.

When I had finished he lit a cigarette, leaned forward and exhaled smoke slowly as he stared at the floor. "You want the know-how?"

"Legally or illegally."

"That means you want Lamont?"

"Right."

"You can raise the money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

I shrugged and rose to refill our glasses. How much! I'd seen the day when anybody you hired to lean on somebody—well, I suppose these organizations operate differently now. I said, "Half a million dollars."

"Is it worth that?"

"Every cent. I know."

He accepted the refill thoughtfully. "Is there a time factor?"

"Yes. Tomorrow."

He grinned. "Let's be realistic."

"That guy Lamont is on a plane tonight with enough power in his skull to blow my whisky business, and everyone else's in the world, to smithereens in a week. He'll be wandering around Scotland *asking* for something to happen to him. I want him and his know-how back here working for me within weeks. Is *that* realistic?"

"Maybe," He was making notes in a little pad. "He's married? Got children?"

I began to feel better about Daly. I smiled: "Mr. Daly, there's something I like about you and your outfit. You get to where people live."

We finished about 2 a.m. and by the end of our meeting I began to have a fresh respect for the modern approach of today's professional pressure business. There was no doubt about it, things had come a long way since Ed Buccelli and I made our first few thousand dollars unprohibiting on the New York riversides. Gascoine Peterson got my account that night.

My reckoning was that I had about six weeks, at the outside, to get Lamont's know-how into my business. I had no complaint when Daly visited me at my office in New York the following afternoon with a portfolio which he put on my desk in front of me. It was titled "Project 183". I grinned as

he sat down in front of my desk. "I wonder what the other one hundred and eighty-two were."

"Successful." He lit a cigarette.

The twenty-two sheets of type-written paper in the portfolio were laid out like a marketing plan or a new financial venture or a research report. In these later days of my business-running, I had seen hundreds like it. This one was exceptional; it planned only one thing—how to get me Andrew Lamont's process for making Scotch whisky artificially. Important giveaway words were coded. 'Whisky' was called china-clay and 'Scotland' was called Panama. Only Daly and I knew the code-words.

I took three-quarters of an hour to read it, while Daly looked out the window and smoked cigarettes. When I had finished I asked, "How much?"

"Forty thousand dollars."

"You're crazy."

He came over to the desk, took the portfolio and put it in his briefcase. He had put on his hat when I said, "I'll buy it." I had a feeling you didn't mess around with these people. Times had changed.

The first part of that plan involved me personally. The agreement was that, if I succeeded and there was no need for further intervention by Gascoine Peterson, my outlay would be a token one of

five thousand dollars. Naturally I wanted that part to succeed, although I didn't have much hope.

Helen Lamont was a good-looking woman. When she walked into the cocktail bar of the hotel in Glasgow, dressed in blue, I felt



glad I had no stomach or double-chin.

She smiled. "Mr. Sullivan?"

I rose. "Yes, Mrs. Lamont." We shook hands. "I'm glad you could come. Won't you sit down?"

She was shapely and had a clear, pink complexion.

"Thanks for describing the color

of your tie. It's distinctive, indeed."

"I met you once at a distillery opening in the Highlands, but I felt you wouldn't know me again. That's why I mentioned the tie."

"Did you have a pleasant flight?" For the wife of a Scots whisky chemist, she seemed very assured.

"Yes, thanks." I ordered drinks as she took off her white gloves. Yes, Mrs. Lamont *was* a good-looking woman. She had a very shapely neck and very clear, blue eyes. "Did your husband enjoy his few days in New York?"

"Not very. He didn't say much about it to me, but I got the impression he was kept very busy. Of course, Andrew doesn't discuss business with me very much." She looked me straight between the eyes. "So I don't ask a great deal. He tells me what he wants to tell me. That suits me."

The waiter brought the drinks, and this gave me some time to think how I should approach her. "Mrs. Lamont, I think you know why I'm here today."

"I could make a guess."

"You know why your husband was in New York with Mr. Ogilvie."

"Yes." She smiled.

I lifted my glass and smiled. "That makes my job easier."

"Does it?"

"Do you want him to make a

lot of money from his whisky process?"

"If that's what Andrew wants." She sipped her drink as if there were nothing more to say on that score. It took me a few seconds to get used to it.

"You haven't told me what *you* want."

She nodded and put down her glass. "Mr. Sullivan, I think I know what you want. You would like me to try to influence my husband to sell you or lease you the rights of his process. You want to negotiate."

I offered her a cigarette which she accepted. "I admire your sense. Don't misunderstand me, I want to buy that process at a price which would make your head swim."

"My head doesn't swim easily. I think I know what it's worth, although I don't know anything about the process. I can tell you in a nutshell all I want. I want him to sell out so that he and I and the children can have all we've wanted for years. I want us to be rich."

I had a real job stemming my enthusiasm. "Then why in the world doesn't he sell it—to me?"

"Because he has scruples."

"Scruples about what?"

"You don't *have* to have scruples about anything, Mr. Sullivan. You just have to have them. Some

people have a lot of them—like freckles, or hair on their heads. My husband is one of these." She sighed. "I know how he feels about this; he just doesn't want to be the means of ruining the Scotch whisky industry. He says it's like killing the French wine industry." She played with her glass. "Scotland means a great deal to him."

"Mrs. Lamont, listen to me—" It was the way she moved her eyes very slightly that made me turn around in my chair quickly. Andrew Lamont was standing right behind me. I felt terrible. Then I felt angry.

"Don't get up," he said, smiling. He moved around and sat in the vacant chair at our table. "You never give up, do you, Alex?"

I lit a cigarette. "No, I don't."

Mrs. Lamont appeared a little embarrassed. Frankly that's how I saw it, too. She said, "I told Andrew you'd asked to meet me here today. I don't keep secret appointments, Mr. Sullivan."

I tried to smile. "Look, let's face this thing right in the teeth. Andrew—"

"No, you face it right in the teeth, Alex," Lamont said. "I know what my wife wants because she's laid all her cards on the table to me; she wants the Lamont family to make a lot of money from this process. I know what *I* want; I

want the process to be proved a success. And I know what *you* want; you just want your hands on that process so you can corner the artificial Scotch market and put everybody out of business in two years." He lit a cigarette. "There's just one snag. Nobody's going to *get* what he wants because I am not prepared to kill off a traditional industry that's been exclusive to this country for five hundred years."

Mrs. Lamont was looking at the water jug.

I sighed and swallowed some temper. "You really mean that?"

"That's exactly how I see it."

I got up because I couldn't just sit there and watch that jumped-up Scottish peasant lay down a statement like that which left me no room to move even an inch—no negotiation, no compromise, no nothing—so I pushed back my chair and said, "You're goin' to see this another way soon." I thought of the balance of payment to Daly and I felt angrier.

"I don't think so"

"But I *know* so. Don't you be crazy enough to imagine you can sit on something like this on your own terms and hold back progress of *this* size in the liquor industry, Lamont. If you don't have the brains to sell this process now to the industry, you'll have to be

treated like an escaped lunatic and the responsibility taken out of your hands."

"And put into *yours*, Mr. Sullivan?" It was Helen Lamont who spoke.

"Yes. I have the money and the facilities to develop it, and I am going to use them."

Lamont took his wife's arm and she stood up as he said, "I wouldn't do a deal with you on this process if you were the last whisky man in the world, Sullivan. Goodbye."

I went out and straight to room 418 where Daly was waiting for me.

He laid down his newspaper as the door slammed. "No dice?"

"Pull the switch, Daly. Give them everything. You sold me pressure. I bought it. Now you apply it. And fast."

Nobody knows exactly how agencies like Gascoine-Peterson work when they get going, but I did insist on knowing *what* they were doing in Scotland to the Lamonts. I enjoyed every telephone call across the Atlantic, every report.

They started on the children. First, they took the older boy to a country lane outside Glasgow, roughed him up and telephoned the parents where they would find him. Then they frightened the younger boy, ripped his clothing,

and he scurried home screaming.

By Thursday of the following week I was beginning to feel back home on the New York waterfront with Buccelli. On Monday they intended starting on Helen Lamont; I didn't like this—I always hated hearing about women being kicked—but Daly reckoned Lamont would be ready to crack by the end of that week. Gascoine Peterson were earning their money.

I received no calls on Saturday or Sunday, and I got into my office early on Monday morning.

Daly was looking out of the window of my office when I walked in. He didn't even turn around.

"Hello," I said as I put my hat on the rack.

He said nothing.

I walked behind my desk and sat down. I was about to talk to him again when I saw the package of papers, fastened with an elastic band and topped with a letter. I picked it up warily, as if I knew already it was something very important. The letter was multi-graphed and it began "Dear . . ." then followed my name handwritten in ink.

"You'd better read it," Daly said in a flat voice, still looking out the window, his hands behind his back.

I ripped off the elastic band, and

the following is what I then read:

Dear Mr. Sullivan,

The enclosed papers, drawings, and chemical specifications will give you full details of a method for the production of Scotch malt whisky from any basic vegetable matter. The process has been scientifically proved at various periods under various conditions and at numerous locations over the past eight years.

Any further information you require about the process will be supplied to you free of charge on request from the writer. You should know that facsimile copies of the drawings and the specifications of the process have been mailed to every liquor-producing company in the world simultaneously. There are 1153 such companies in the mailing.

Yours faithfully,

Andrew Lamont

My hands were trembling. I dropped the package on my desk. "What the hell—is this?"

Daly turned round. "Mr. Lamont has delivered."

"This damn letter—it's—duplicated. He's sent it everywhere."

"That's what he says. He's sent it to every important manufacturer in the world." He sat down opposite my desk.

"Did you know it was here?"

He lit a cigarette. "I knew he

was sending it. I came off the plane from Scotland this morning. Before I left he showed me a copy of it, and the drawings and specifications."

I felt my voice bleating. "He's—but he's sent it everywhere."

"All over the world. The printing and mailing costs were eight hundred pounds sterling. He paid it himself."

"He's—nuts."

"It was his wife's idea. She's a clever woman. She organized it the day you left them in Glasgow."

"B-but what do I get out of this?"

"Nothing."

I felt the sweat on my upper lip. "Nothing!" I tried to laugh. "Well, well! You can't beat a public announcement, can you? You can't patent something everybody's got, can you?" I took out my handkerchief and patted my mouth. "This guy's fooled all of us. Or his wife has."

There was a silence. We looked at each other. Then I saw Daly smile and fetch a slip of paper from his pocket. He laid it on my desk in front of me, unfolded.

He said, "May as well get it all over in one morning, Mr. Sullivan."

"What's this?"

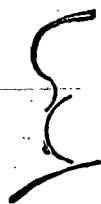
"That's our bill."

"Bill? What for?" I picked up the paper. I don't remember what I said. All I can remember is my own babbling voice. I felt terrible but I couldn't stop. "Forty thousand dollars! This is crazy! You can't charge me for this. I know I said I wanted this process, but not like this. You must see that yourself. It's unreasonable. You can't push me to this. It's a lot of money. There were certain conditions. Be fair. What about a drink? Couldn't we talk this over? I didn't know it would turn out like this. Be reasonable."

I was still talking in a funny kind of high voice when Daly went to the door and opened it. Two large men came in quietly, and one of them took a rubber truncheon from his pocket. I tried to scream but no sound would come. I heard Daly say, "Leave his right arm intact. He'll need it for signing the check."



When a worm turns, it often weaves a unique pattern.



WALTER kept the pillow over his wife's face for a full five minutes after she stopped struggling, but then he did lift it and he felt reassured. For a moment he had feared she was faking. It would be just like her to go limp, then sit up minutes later to say, "You failed again, Walter. Can't you do anything right?"

No, Editha was dead. The glazed eyes bulged up at him out of her sharp, shrewish face, her



by **Bob Foster**

lips were pulled back, showing dingy teeth. "You see," he whispered intensely at the pale face, "I did have the nerve."

She had told him he didn't, earlier that same evening. They had just gotten home from a party at the Weavers', and as they entered the kitchen from the connected garage she had berated him in that horrible, persistent voice. "You must enjoy humiliating me. Honestly, Walter, asking Mrs. Weaver to dance when you're the worst dancer in town. You really can't dance at all, but you had to get out on the floor and walk all over her feet. And then," she had continued, marching straight into the livingroom toward the liquor cabinet, "when her husband mentioned that the Orphans' Home Fund Drive needs a chairman you had to jump up and volunteer! You don't have enough sense to organize anything, let alone a big charity drive."

"Tom Weaver seems to think I could do it," Walter had replied as he sank into the depths of his easy chair. "He wants me to go to a meeting about it with him next week."

Editha had sloshed bourbon into a tumbler. "At least you're trying something. That's more than you usually do. Which reminds me, what did you do about the over-

charge on the phone bill, Walter?"

Walter had reached for a cigarette, knowing what was about to come. "I wrote them a check for it."

"You wrote them a check! When that long distance call they charged to us wasn't made from here?" The bourbon had disappeared in one long gulp. "Walter, how could you do such a fool thing? Why couldn't you stand up to them and refuse to pay it?" She had stood over him, her eyes stabbing scorn and hatred. "Do I have to do everything around here to make sure it's done right?"

"Editha, did I do anything today that pleased you?"

"I doubt it." She had poured and swallowed another drink in one motion. "I'm going to bed now. Incidentally, I notice you're drinking a lot this evening, so don't come upstairs all full of cute little drunken romantic ideas, because I'll scratch your eyes out."

He had watched her as she went down the hall toward the bedroom, one hand reaching for the zipper on the back of her severe gray dress. "One of these nights," he said conversationally, "I'm going to shoot you."

Her voice had come to him weighted with scorn and disgust. "Oh, Walter, don't be absurd. You haven't got a gun. Besides," she

had tossed off, making it sound like an afterthought, "you haven't got the nerve."

He could hear her saying it now as he stared down at the still figure on the bed, watching her fingers slowly relax back into hands from the talons they had been. "*You haven't got the nerve.*"

"Yes I have," Walter shrieked at her, wildly aware of being able to talk back to her for the first time. "See, I did it. I did it!"

The realization that, having done it, he had to get away with it snapped him from his stiff pose hovering over her. He needed a way to dispose of the body, a way to explain Editha's disappearance. He had to get organized. "*You don't have enough sense to organize anything,*" echoed in his mind.

"Yes I do," he said tensely to the shape under the sheet. "You were wrong before and you are now, too. I had the nerve to kill you and I'll come up with some place to put you."

"*I doubt it.*"

"Shut up! Shut up!" His voice broke with the tension as he cocked his small right fist and sent it slamming down into the snarling mouth. "I killed you! Now stay dead!"

Turning from the shape on the bed, Walter walked back into the livingroom and settled himself in

his easy chair once more, his head tilted forward in thought. Getting her out of the house would be simple enough. With the car in the connected garage he could slip her into the trunk and no one could possibly see. The problem was where to take her. He certainly couldn't just dump her somewhere, and even a grave in a deserted area wouldn't be guarantee enough that she would never be found. If she were, her husband would, of course, be the prime murder suspect, so he had to be absolutely certain that Editha's disappearance was complete.

Walter's eye caught the evening paper, which he had dropped casually on the coffee table as he left for Weaver's hours ago, and he idly began to fold it up. The headline seemed to leap from the front page and grab him: *Paving Crews Start on Five Mile Stretch of Freeway.* For a moment he sat there contemplating it, thoughts tearing through his mind as he tried to recall the exact location of the new highway. Then, glancing at his wristwatch, he jumped from the chair and hurried back to the bedroom.

Walter didn't hear Editha's voice as he took her suitcase from the closet and filled it with an assortment of her clothes. When he was finished several dresses, two pairs

of shoes, three changes of her plain, white cotton underwear, and her toilet articles lay in the bottom of the bag. Walter closed the suitcase and turned to Editha. "That should be enough to make the police think you packed up and left," he said as he hoisted her into a sitting position and then bent to pull her forward across his shoulder. With a grunt he heaved himself erect and staggered toward the garage. Minutes later, as he backed his car out of the driveway, Editha, her suitcase, and a short spade lay in the trunk.

Walter approached the new freeway along a county trunk road that intersected it a few miles out of town. It was nearly three a.m. by the time he arrived at the intersection, so he met no traffic. As he pulled his sedan over to park in a dusky culvert alongside the freeway's overpass he could see the lights of a few cars and semi's traveling along the old highway that the freeway would replace two hundred yards away. Taking the suitcase and spade, he climbed a red clay embankment to the level of the new freeway.

It was a dark night, clouds hanging low overhead, with the threat of rain. Walter wasn't sure if he liked that or not. The darkness made him secure from any notice by travelers on the old high-

way, but he wanted no rain to interfere with the paving crews in the morning. They had to start on schedule.

Selecting a spot where the direct line of sight to the old highway was blocked by a great earth mover, Walter began to dig in the clay roadbed. A few minutes and one trip to the car later, Editha lay with her suitcase beside her in her grave on the freeway's right of way.

"Now you see what an organizer I am," Walter told her, triumph edging into his voice. He dropped the first spadeful of dirt directly onto her face. "For now, it's only an unmarked grave," more dirt falling, her shape becoming obscured now, "but by tomorrow you'll have the world's biggest tombstone—five miles of concrete. I hope you appreciate it."

The grave was filled. After using the flat of his spade to level out the grave's surface and make it even with the surrounding roadbed, Walter made several trips to the earth mover to deposit the excess dirt in its hopper. The prepared roadbed had to be left as smooth and flawless as he had found it.

When he arrived home there wasn't enough time to go to bed before he'd have to get ready for work, so Walter made the bed,

smoothing the sheets and spread on the side where Editha had lain much more neatly than she would ever have done herself.

"It's too bad she couldn't have a real funeral," he told himself, stripping off his shirt and tie on the way to the bathroom for a quick shower. "Still," he mentioned to his reflection in the mirror as he soaped his cheeks and slid a fresh blade into his razor, "there were some attendants present—the earth movers, the graders, the dump trucks; and the concrete mixers. We mustn't forget the concrete mixers; not when they're going to donate her marvelous tombstone."

Walter left the house at his usual time and drove straight to work, feeling well rested for a man who had no sleep the previous night. On his way home that afternoon, still feeling surprisingly well, he looped out past Editha's grave. The clouds hadn't delivered their rain after all, and the pavers had progressed very nicely. Editha had her tombstone. Despite that, he waited until late that night—later than most husbands would—before dialing the phone and saying, "Police? I want to report a missing person."

When the new stretch of freeway was dedicated, Walter took the afternoon off to attend the

ceremonies. By that time he had filed for a divorce from Editha on grounds of desertion and, he suspected, the police were busily trying to prove he had killed her. They couldn't really do that, he kept telling himself, until they found a body. Their chances of doing that were slight, indeed.

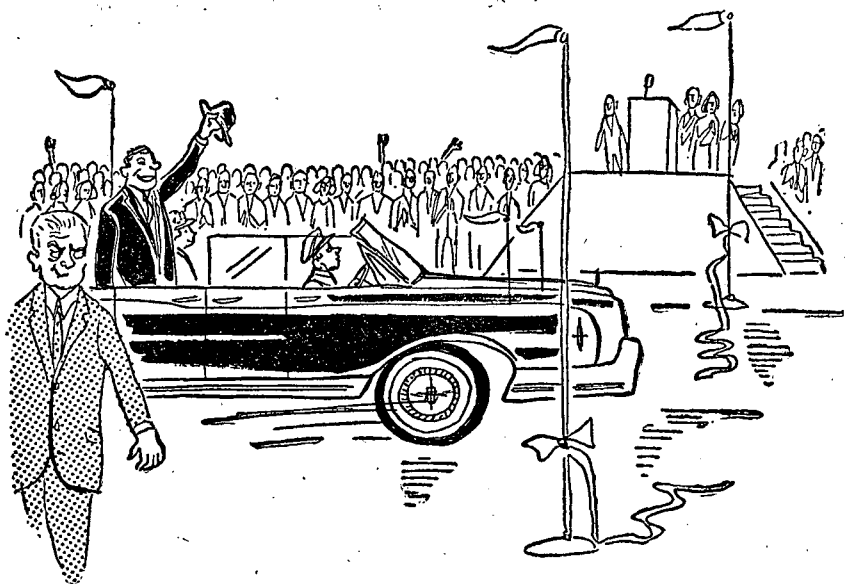
The governor, who had been invited to officiate at the ceremonies, stepped down from the speaker's rostrum, sliced through the red ribbon barricade with that jovial dignity peculiar to politicians, and was driven off in his limousine to polite applause. Walter watched as the motorcade approached Editha's grave. "How does it make you feel," he said to her under his breath, "having the governor drive right over you? Important?"

"Walter, don't be absurd."

He stiffened sharply from the shock of hearing her voice, one hand gripping the car beside him for support. It was the first time she had spoken to him since the night he had beaten her out of his life. Breathing deeply he tried to control himself. "It's just this once," he said aloud, unaware of the odd looks thrown at him by people standing nearby. "On a special occasion. I won't hear from her again."

"I doubt it."

The last time, hitting her had



helped. He had an urge to smash his fist into her once more even though he knew it was impossible. He needed a place to sit down and think, a quiet, relaxing place. He got into his car and headed for the nearest bar.

Ten hours later Walter was working on his fifth bar. None of them had offered the right amount of quiet and order he needed to think his way out of the situation. *If those people over by the juke box would stop dancing and turn it off,* he thought, *I might be able to come up with something.* But they seemed to be having too much fun. He began to watch them, trying to forget his trouble in their

gaiety, but it wasn't contagious.

"I notice you're drinking a lot this evening."

"What if I am? Shouldn't make any difference to you," he slurred, motioning to the bartender to refill his glass. "You're dead. Nobody knows it but me. Police don't know it, your friends don't know it, you talk like you don't even know it. But I do. So what you think doesn't make any difference to me at all."

He looked back toward the dancers, concentrating on one young blonde. Her hair was flying around her face and neck as she wildly went at one of the new dances, smiling up into her part-

ner's eyes. "Why couldn't we have been like that, Editha? Happy, dancing, and having a good time," he mumbled.

"You're the worst dancer in town."

"I am not," he exclaimed loudly, drawing a strange look from the bartender.

"You really can't dance at all."

"Yes I can!" He was growing angry at her criticism now. "I'll show you what a good dancer I am." He finished his drink, dropped a bill on the bar, and started for the parking lot, not walking too steadily. "I'll dance on your grave, Editha. Then maybe you'll leave me alone. I'll dance on your gravel!"

The culvert was even darker than the last time he had been there. Walter parked, one side of his car sliding off the shoulder and into the ditch. A fine mist was falling, putting a thin slime on the bare clay sides of the freeway's embankment. Crawling from the car, Walter began to clamber up the embankment, slipping and falling in the ooze.

"I'll show you," he kept muttering as he scrambled to the top and struggled across a low fence, tearing his jacket. He came to a stop on the edge of the pavement. "Watch this." Walter held out his arms, encircling an imaginary figure. The tune of an old waltz came to mind. He began to hum it softly, dancing across the freeway, his feet scraping harshly on the concrete. "You see, Editha, what a good dancer I am? Now we'll go faster." He picked up the tempo of the waltz and danced faster and faster into the soggy black night that suddenly became bright as day.

George Martin pulled the blanket shrouded figure from the back of his ambulance. "Take your time," he told the hospital attendants who came rushing to his aid. "You can't do anything for this one. Run down by a semi out on the new freeway." George paused to light a cigarette. "You know what the truck driver told me this nut was doing? Dancing. Can you beat that? Dancing!"



Genetics, it would appear, is nothing less than intricate.



A NATURAL BORN VICTIM



and he was always a-walkin' off on his own, just forgettin' about school. Now don't get me wrong, there warn't nothin' mean or vicious about him. It was just the other way 'round. He was what you might call over-docile, a natural born victim.

While Benny's maw was alive she saw to it he toed the straight and narrer. Of course now and then there was a spot of trouble, like the time the Cromarty broth-

By Wenzell
Brown

SEEMS like when the good Lord was passin' out brains he sort of skimmed on Benny Bruder. Ever since I was first elected sheriff of Pisquaticook County, nigh on to thirty-three years ago, I been keepin' an eye on Benny. Somehow he could never learn to read or write,

ers decided to bust into Dawson's Grocery and persuaded Benny to act as lookout. Benny don't rightly know the score, and he's flattered that the Cromartys take an interest in him. So he tags along but as soon as they're out of sight, he forgets what it is he's supposed to be

doin' and just wanders away. I reckon that's one reason I caught the Cromartys with their hands in the till, so to speak. Rightly I should have pulled Benny in too, but it didn't seem worthwhile. He didn't mean no harm; he was just bein' obligin'.

When his maw died, Benny inherited a nice piece of farmland and an old house near the foot of Mount Solomon, to say nothin' of a tidy bank account that meant years of savin'. Soon as I hear about it, I'm troubled that someone'll try to fleece him out of his possessions, but it never occurred to me to warn him about Annie Hart.

Annie's a widder woman as runs a bunch of tourist cabins out to Bingham's Beach. It ain't much of a show, just an office and six beat-up cottages formin' a horse-shoe at the rear. Rumors come my way from time to time about goin's-on at the Golden Hart, which is what she calls the place, but seein' as how they ain't no official complaints, I don't pay 'em no mind.

Annie's quite a figger of a woman, if you like 'em on the husky side, with black hair, olive skin and flashin' dark eyes. But Annie's got a tongue as sharp as a carvin' knife and a temper to match. Folks 'round Cripple's Bend tend

to steer clear of Annie and it seems like she's got only one friend. That's Fló Naismith, who helps her run the cabins and lives with her at the Golden Hart durin' the dead season. To tell the truth, Fló ain't much of a bargain. She's skinny and sallow with pointy features and lanky mouse-colored hair. She tags along after Annie and don't open her mouth very often. When she does, her voice is thin and whinin' so it rasps on your nerves.

I ain't acquainted as to how Annie first dug her claws into Benny, but it ain't long after his maw's funeral that she's got him hooked. I don't hear nothin' about it till they're married by a justice of the peace over to Rockland. I reckon that Annie planned everything secret for fear someone'd scare Benny off.

Once Annie is Mrs. Benny Bruder there ain't no one can put a spoke in her wheels. I hear as how Benny's savin's account is dwindle-dlin' fast and it ain't long afore his maw's farm is sold, with Annie pocketin' the money, claimin' as how she needs it to expand the Golden Hart.

I drop over to the tourist court from time to time to see how Benny's makin' out. He warn't never a talkative feller, but now he can't even stop to pass the time of

day. Annie's got him too busy cleanin' the cabins, puttin' on fresh paint and shinglin' the roofs. He's a steady, reliable worker as long as somebody's watchin' over him, and Annie don't miss a trick. She's right there on the spot givin' out with the orders lickety-split like there ain't a moment to spare.

Things get even worse when the tourist season rolls 'round. Benny's doin' all the work, with Annie and Flo takin' care of the heavy lookin'-on. I don't like to see a man bein' made a fool of and I keep away. People is snickerin' about Benny and how Annie's turned him into a drudge and stripped him of his cash, but he ain't complainin'. He's always smilin' like there ain't nothin' he likes better'n bein' a work horse for Annie.

You'd think Annie'd leave well enough alone. She's latched onto Benny's house and bank account and is like to workin' him to death, but she's got more tricks to her than a trained seal. One of her regular customers is an insurance man from Portland. T'ain't long afore he's sold her a policy on Benny with one of those double indemnity clauses that pays ten thousand dollars if he meets up with a fatal accident. Just to make things look good, Annie buys a second policy on herself with

Benny as beneficiary. Benny's too dumb to be suspicious, but when it's time for the payoff, the insurance investigators is like to do a bit of checkin'.

Annie may be smart but she's too greedy to be cautious. Seems like the ink ain't dry on the contract afore she's a-plottin' and connivin' with Flo as how to lay her hands on that money. At first Flo sort of balks at murder, but it ain't long afore Annie's got her twisted 'round her finger. She promises her a thousand dollars of the take and assures her there won't be no danger. Pretty soon the pair of 'em is up to their necks workin' on plans to polish off poor old Benny.

"We could jerk a ladder out from under him while he's fixin' the roof," Flo says happily.

Annie sighs and shakes her head. "Them's one story cottages. Chances are he wouldn't more'n break a leg and that'd make our job harder'n ever."

"We could feed him rat poison. There's plenty out in the shed."

Annie looks at her scornfully. "Arsenic stays in the body forever, I hear. We'd never be safe."

"But who'd look for it?"

"It won't do," Annie says emphatically. "This has got to appear like a real genuine accident."

They talk about ground glass,

ptomaine poisonin' and fake hold-ups, but Annie vetoes all of 'em as too risky. "It's got to be a natural kind of accident, the sort that could happen to anybody. What's the most common cause of accidental death?"

Flo puckers up her mouth in thought. "Automobile accidents, I guess. But Benny don't drive."

"You don't have to be drivin' to be kilt. Benny's forever walkin' along the highway at night. Remember how the state troopers stopped to warn him to face into the headlights instead of walkin' with his back to 'em? But Benny's always forgettin'. It would be easy to nudge him from the back."

"But a nudge might not kill him and we wouldn't dare get out and look. There's too many cars along the highway."

Annie's jaw hardens with determination. "Then we'll have to run over him somewhere else and dump his body in a ditch by the side of the road."

Flo knew better'n to argue with Annie once she'd made up her mind. Besides, as the plan unrolled it didn't look like it could miss.

There's an abandoned farmhouse up near the top of Mount Solomon. An old couple, name of White lived there till they died and left it to their married daughter

who lives down in the valley more'n a mile away. It's a spooky sort of place with nobody hardly ever goin' up there. Annie reckons it's just right for a quiet spot of murder with no chance of interruptions.

"But how're we goin' to entice Benny there?" Flo asks.

Annie laughs at that. "Benny ain't never hard to entice. We'll tell him we're goin' up to the White farm to steal apple trees. That'll give us a reason for sneak-in' up after dark without tellin' nobody, an excuse for gettin' him out of the car too. We'd better take a pick and shovel and some gunny sacks."

Flo and Annie is more thorough than you'd expect. They even make a couple of dry runs to study the lay of the land. There's a low stone wall in front of the grounds and a long straight driveway leadin' to the garage. They decide to park the car by the wall; then Annie'll lead Benny down the middle of the path. Flo'll start the car and run him down while Annie steps to one side. They'll make sure he's dead and then hustle his body into the back of the car. After that all they'll have to do is dump him beside the highway when there's no other cars in sight. Annie claims as how it ought to be easy as rollin' off a

log, mebbe easier, and Flo has to agree.

All the same, when the big day wheels 'round both of 'em is as jittery as tomcats in the spring. They don't want to drive up to the White place till it's good'n dark, but they're too much on edge to sit still and do nothin' so they decide to cruise about for a bit first. Flo's a-drivin' with Annie beside her and Benny in the back seat. Pretty soon it occurs to 'em that mebbe it ain't a good idea for Benny to be seen with 'em when only a while later he's to show up as a victim of a hit-and-run driver. The next time they see a car a-comin', Annie orders Benny to duck down low. Like always, he don't ask no questions but does like he's told.

Trouble is, it's such a nice balmy evenin', it seems like everybody's out for a spin. Benny don't hardly get off'n his knees afore Annie's hissin' him back down again. After a while he catches on and squinches up all by hisself, which just goes to show how well Annie's got him trained.

They reach the old White farm just at dusk but they don't dare try nothin' yet. There's always an off chance of kids hangin' 'round or somebody huntin' rabbits in the woods. When night finally falls, the moon's behind a cloud and it's

black as the inside of Satan's glove. Flo noses the car up to the broken gate.

Annie yanks Benny out of the car. She says, "Come on, let's take a look at them there trees."

Benny wants to lug along the shovel and the gunny sacks but Annie says that can wait; right now all they're goin' to do is get the lay of the land. She takes him by the arm and leads him down the cindered drive that's all grown up with grass.

Flo's engine growls in back of them and her headlights flick on. The car comes trundlin' along the drive smack at their backs. Annie lets go of Benny's arm and jumps to the side, but Flo ain't built up much of a head of steam yet. Benny looks over his shoulder, gives a whoop and a holler and leaps aside. Flo misses him by as much as a couple of feet. She plows on till the car skids to a stop halfway down the drive.

Annie's sore as a boil. She says to Benny, "I'm goin' to give that Flo a piece of my mind. You stay here." She strides to the car and Benny hears her chewin' out Flo, but he don't catch many of the words savin' that Flo's a nincompoop and a fool and he's heard that plenty of times afore.

Flo backs the car up and Annie angles Benny into the middle of

the path again. This time Flo works up more speed, but Benny's on his toes. He and Annie jump at the same time and go a-tumblin' into the grass together.

Annie's fit to be tied. First she bawls out Benny for knockin' her down and then she lights into Flo. By now Flo's in tears. She says, "I just can't do it. Talkin' about it is easy, but when it comes to the real thing, I keep losin' my nerve."

Annie gives a snort of outrage. She says, "I can see I got to tend to everything. All right, I'll knock him out first. Then it won't be so hard for you."

She starts huntin' in the back of the car for some weapon but they ain't brought no tools along and the pick and shovel is too unwieldy. She's stumped till she remembers the toolshed in the White place. She walks down there usin' a pencil flashlight to show the way. The shed's locked but it ain't hard to force the latch. Sure enough, Annie finds what she wants in no time flat. It's a heavy wooden mallet to drive in pegs, like you don't see no more.

She hides the mallet in the folds of her skirt and heads back to where Benny and Flo are waitin'. You'd think by this time even a simpleton like Benny would have some idea of the score, but it seems like he just can't believe his wife

would do him no harm whatever.

Anyway Flo gets the car back into place and Annie and Benny start up the path for the third time. This time Benny's a-watchin' the car, tryin' to reckon what Flo's up to, and his back's turned to Annie. She waits till the car wobbles right up on top of 'em, then she raises on her tiptoes and clobbers Benny smack on the crown of his head. The car hits him as he's a-goin' down and sends him into a nose dive. By now, Flo's near to hysterics and she stalls the car right over his body.

Annie squats down to look under the car. There's a lot of blood on Benny's head and he looks deader'n a horse mackerel but afore she can make sure, Flo gives a stifled scream.

"Annie! Look what's comin'."

Annie straightens up and a sobbin' sound comes out of her throat. There's headlights stabbin' the night, jostlin' along the road up the mountainside.

Flo gasps, "What'll we do?"

"Nothin'. Just sit tight. Benny don't show none. We'll just have to wait 'em out."

T'aint more'n a minute or so afore an old sedan swings around in front of the gate and a man and woman clambers out. It's Joe and Sally Liscomb from down the



valley. Sally's the daughter of the Whites and the rightful owner of the farm. She's seen the lights from down below and wants to know what's goin' on.

Annie don't take to bein' questioned and pretty soon the two women is in a hassle.

Sally yells, "You ain't up to no good here. I think you came to

steal anything that ain't attached."

That makes Annie madder'n a hornet. She yells back, "You ain't got no right callin' me a thief. I'm an honest woman."

Sally sneers, "That ain't the way I hear it."

I reckon they would've come to blows right then and there if Joe Liscomb hadn't stepped in between. He's a big man and the commandin' type. He says, "Just for the record, what about lettin' us search your car?"

Annie glares at him. "Go ahead. Search all you please. You won't find nothin' to prove me a thief."

Joe switches the beam of his flashlight over the back seat and down to the floor. The pick and the shovel are there and he's right suspicious. He goes to the rear and opens up the trunk but there ain't no stolen property as far as he can see. It never occurs to him to look beneath the car. Besides, he ain't too much interested. There's nothin' much worth stealin' left in the old house.

He says, "It seems like mebbe we owe you folks an apology."

Sally ain't havin' it. She says, "I don't know what you're up to but it ain't no good. You get off'n my land."

Annie snaps back, "I'll go when I get good and ready."

It looks like the two of 'em is

set for another tussle, but Joe pulls Sally away.

"We'll go back to the car," Sally screams over her shoulder, "but we won't leave till after you do."

"Is that so?" Annie roars back. "Well, let me tell you something. I ain't movin' one inch till you start down that mountainside."

Sally flounces away but she's good as her word. She slides behind the wheel and settles down like she's ready to wait all night if it need be.

All the time there ain't been no sound from Benny, but Flo's wringin' her hands and weepin'.

"What are we goin' to do?" she keeps askin'.

Annie shrugs. "One thing's for sure. We can't do nothin' till we can get rid of the Liscombs somehow. We start on our way and they'll spot Benny. What's more, we can't pass it off as no accident any longer. We just got to sit tight and outwait 'em. We ain't got no choice."

Time goes on, better'n half an hour, and neither car stirs. Annie and Flo can hear talkin' in the Liscomb car and realize there's other people there. After a while Flo calms down and says, "Let me go over and take a crack at Sally. She ain't a bad sort, and if you hadn't ruffled her feathers she wouldn't be so stubborn."

"She called me a thief," Annie retorts. "I ain't takin' that from nobody."

Flo ambles over to the gate. She sees there's a couple of young'ns in the back seat and another woman. The little girl is gettin' fretful and Joe Liscomb is grouchy.

Flo puts on her best manners and starts pleadin' with Sally. "I know you're right but once Annie's spoken her mind, blue horses can't make her change. But if you leave we'll trail down the mountain right behind you. I promise you we will."

Sally thinks it over. "All right. I'll drive as far as the bend in the road, but if you ain't movin' by then, I'll turn around and come straight back."

As soon as Flo's back o' the wheel once more, Sally starts drivin' off real slow. Flo makes a wide U-turn. Annie lingers behind to get a last look at Benny. He's lyin' all white and still with dried blood a-streakin' his face. She's sure he's dead so she tosses a couple o' gunny sacks over him to make him harder to see but there ain't time to do more.

The Liscombs is stopped at the bend and Sally's a-honkin' her horn. Annie hops into the car fast and they get a move on. They catch up with Sally and the two cars make the rest of the trip down

Mount Solomon only a few yards apart. When they hit the paved road, Flo blasts her horn once and heads for the highway.

Flo's pretty well shook up but Annie's calm as a clam. She says, "Tomorrer night we'll sneak back and this time we won't use no headlights. We'll grab Benny and dump him by the road just like we planned."

"What if the Liscombs go back and search the place?"

"Why should they? There ain't nothin' there they want."

Flo wails, "Poor Benny!"

"Ain't no harm comin' to him layin' out there all night. And let me tell you something. If you hadn't lost your nerve and been so all-fired clumsy, none of us would be in this pickle."

I reckon a feller as stupid as Benny is entitled to some dumb luck. Anyway it warn't long after the cars left when a storm blows up. The cold and the rain on his face bring Benny to. He's got a lot of aches and pains, a broken arm, a bloody head and a slight concussion, but other than that there ain't nothin' wrong with him. He manages to stumble to his feet and goes a-lurchin' down the mountain towards the lights of the Liscomb place.

He's all tuckered out by the time he reaches the house but he's

able to let out a yell afore he collapses in the yard. Joe Liscomb comes out and finds him and rushes him to Doc Colby. Doc patches Benny up as best he can and then puts him to bed in the infirmary at the back of his office.

T'aint long afore the whole mess is dumped in my lap. I piece together the story and, with a bit of pressure, Flo starts singin' like a canary. Not Annie; she keeps her mouth closed savin' to deny everything.

As soon as Doc'll let me, I have a straight talk with Benny. He's aimin' to go right back to the Golden Hart and Annie.

"Looka here, son," I say, "don't you know them two females was tryin' to murder you?"

He mulls it over for a long time. "Could be," he opines.

"They come within an inch of succeedin' too. Next time your luck ain't like to hold. In your place I'd light out for China. Leastwise I'd steer clear of Annie."

He says, "I wouldn't run out on Annie. Besides, I ain't got no place to go."

I see what he means. Annie's got his money and his house and outside of Cripple's Bend, Benny ain't likely to land a job even as handyman. All the same, I keep pluggin'.

"Annie ain't the kind to give up

easy. You're flirtin' with death, son."

"Mebbe so." His eyes are sort of dull and his words come painful, like they always do. "But I reckon as how she's learned her lesson."

There warn't much more I could say. With Benny refusin' to file a complaint, the case has to be dropped. Annie and Flo get off scot-free and, as far as anyone can see, life goes on at the Golden Hart just like it always done. Benny's doin' all the dirty work, cleanin' the cabins and even cookin' the meals, while Annie rakes in the money and now and then hands him a dollar or two like she was doin' him a big favor.

I'm sort of holdin' my breath, half-expectin' to hear of another accident out to the tourist court, but nigh on to a year goes by without no sign of trouble. I'm beginnin' to think that Benny's right after all. Either Annie's learnt her lesson or else she's layin' mighty low.

Fall comes 'round and the Golden Hart is closed for the season. There ain't much work at the cabins so Benny takes a part-time job with the Gilroys. They're rich city folk who keep a hothouse full of tropical plants. Mostly Benny's pottin' and prunin', and I reckon it's a good thing. It keeps him out of Annie's reach for part

of the day at least, and I rest easy.

The weather's gettin' real chill but there's still a few nice days left, sunny but with a nip to 'em, just right for an outdoor barbecue or a wienie roast. It's on a Sunday afternoon like that I get the call. I'm a-sittin' in Gimpy's Diner, stokin' up on buckwheat cakes and maple syrup, with homemade sausage on the side, when Mrs. Gimpy tells me as how I'm wanted on the phone. It's Lew Satchell, who's settin' in as deputy. He's relayin' a message from my office but he's so worked up he's stut-terin' and can't hardly speak.

Seems like a couple of late tourists are outside. They just come from the Golden Hart where they was tryin' to rent a cabin. When they don't find no one up front, they wander 'round to the rear and right off the bat they trip over a body. They don't waste no time but come hustlin' in to Cripple's Bend fast as they can make it.

I don't wait to hear no more. I yell for Lew to call up Doc Colby and then I jump into the county car and head for the Golden Hart. All the time I'm a-drivin', I'm a-cussin' and blamin' myself for not havin' yanked Benny out of there. Livin' with a connivin' woman like Annie just ain't safe.

I swing the car into the horse-

shoe and rush to the back of the office. Sure enough there's a body layin' there, but it ain't Benny. It's a woman stretched out on the grass. She's face down but there's no mistakin' that black hair and full figger. Sure as God made green apples, I'm a-lookin' at the corpse of Annie Bruder.

I don't want to touch nothing till Doc Colby arrives on the scene, so I wander down to the far end of the horseshoe, where there's a clearin' with a little white pavilion and a barbecue pit. There's a fire a-smolderin' there and when I go for a look I find some charred meat. I find sump'n else too. Flo Naismith has slumped down aside a wicker chair. Her dress is bottle green, almost the same color as the grass, and that's why I ain't spotted her sooner.

I'm still standin' over her when I hear Doc Colby slewin' to a stop in the drive. He comes rushin' over and I leave everything up to him. Sure as tarnation them women has been poisoned, but I don't see how as yet. T'aint till the next day that Doc comes up with the answers. Seems like the lamb they been cookin' has been skewered together with oleander twigs which seep a deadly poison into the meat.

At first I think he's crazy. I yell, "Where in blue blazes did anyone

find oleander twigs? I never heard of none growin' anywhere near Cripple's Bend."

Doc's got an answer to that too. He's already had a talk with Benny. Seems like the Gilroys have a mess of oleanders in their hot-house and Benny's spent most of Saturday afternoon trimmin' 'em. Knowin' as how Annie's set on a barbecue, what's more natural'n to bring the branches home instead of goin' out in the woods to cut a slew of em?

I chew it over. "How come if Benny was a-buildin' the fire and fixin' the barbecue, he didn't eat none of the meat?"

Doc laughs. "That's easy. Just as the meal was ready the Petersen kids, from up the road a stretch, come along in their pickup truck. Their dad's puttin' up a new barn and they want Benny to help. You know how good-natured Benny is; he can't say no to anyone. So the Petersens rush him off his feet and keep him workin' all afternoon. He's still there when he gets the news about Annie and Flo."

"Then it's just plumb dumb luck that Benny ain't dead too."

Doc hems and haws a while. Then he looks me square in the eye and says, "I reckon you could put it that way, Sheriff."

That's the way things stand too. Of course there's an autopsy and

an inquest but there ain't one shred of proof that the deaths ain't one of them fluke accidents what happen from time to time. The only feller that raises any arguments is the insurance adjuster who has to fork over the ten thousand dollars to Benny.

He tells me, "Those oleanders were marked 'poison' clear as the nose on your face."

"Sure," I admit. "But poor Benny, he can't read."

He looks at me sort of rueful-like. "It seems to me that any man working in a hothouse would know all about the dangers of oleanders."

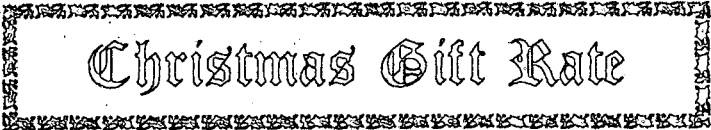
I shake my head. "That'd be true in most cases but not with Benny." Then I spells it out to him, plain and simple. "Seems like I'm always a-tellin' people how it is. You see, when the good Lord was passin' out brains, he just clean up and forgot all about Benny Bruder."

All this happened quite a spell ago and since then Benny's done all right by himself. He sold the Golden Hart, married one of the Petersen girls and set up farmin' on his own. They got a young'un too, a little girl, and you know, it's a funny thing, there ain't no brighter kid in the whole of Cripple's Bend. Yessiree, she's smart as a whip.



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It would seem that subterfuge, ever a dangerous art, has acquired a new dimension.

DALE BUZZLY had stopped in at the lounge of the Hockley Building for a pre-dinner cocktail when he spotted him, the same suave and dashing Phillip Curtendon of

college yesteryear. Buzzly surveyed his old acquaintance from his vantage point in a corner booth. Curtendon had put on a bit of weight in the five years since Buzzly had seen him, but there was that same imperturbable yet somehow eager look in the pale blue eyes, the perfectly straight, too-pretty nose. It was the look of a winner, and Buzzly knew immediately what Curtendon was doing in the Hockley Building lounge.



Curtendon spotted Buzzly, looked astonished, then recovered his composure and walked over to join him in the booth. Buzzly stood, smiling, and held out his hand.

"Why, Dale Buzzly!" Curtendon said as they clasped hands warmly.

"Phil Curtendon," Buzzly said. "What the heck are you doing *here*?"

Curtendon's face remained composed as he sat down. "Oh, I stop in here every once in a while in the evenings."

Buzzly finished his martini, saw that was what Curtendon was drinking and signaled Billy, the bartender, for two more of the same. "What are you doing now, Phil?" he asked.

"I'm a sort of manufacturer's representative," Curtendon said. "The occupation is hard to describe but the pay is good."

Buzzly smiled. "That's what counts."

The barmaid brought their martinis and both men were silent until she'd left.

Buzzly took a sip of his drink and began slowly revolving the glass by its slender stem. "Funny, we never ran into each other before. I'm in here pretty often myself."

Curtendon shrugged. "Coincidence works both ways, I guess."

"You don't live around here, do you, Phil?"

"Nope. Over on the west side of town." Curtendon averted his eyes as he sipped his drink. "Where you living, Dale?"

"I live upstairs," Buzzly said. "The building has apartments from the fifth floor up. I'm on the seventh."

Curtendon looked appropriately surprised. "Say, nice address."

"Yes, nice number," Buzzly said slowly.

Curtendon cleared his throat. "Far cry from our rooms at old State University." He smiled into his drink. "Some days, those . . ."

"Almost ten years ago."

"Remember Professor Newcombe?" Curtendon asked. "And Molly Wallace?"

"Couldn't forget Molly Wallace," Buzzly said. "You know, Phil, I never really liked you much in those days."

Curtendon looked surprised, and more hurt than Buzzly imagined he would.

"Why, that's a hell of a thing to say, Dale. We were even roommates for a while."

"True," Buzzly said. "Maybe that's why we were friends. You always seemed to get the better of me in those days, Phil: better at sports, better grades, better car, better looking . . . I lost more

girls to you than I can remember."

Curtendon laughed, but not very humorously. "Well, you didn't lose the one that counted." He twisted the cheap diamond on his left ring finger. "How is Babs?"

"I'm surprised you didn't ask sooner," Buzzly said, "considering you were engaged to her once."

"Well, buddy boy, that's one you stole from me, and it's been six or seven years ago. It's over and done with now."

"You forget pretty easily, Phil."

Curtendon shook his head. "I just know how to chalk up my losses and not eat my heart out. That's something you should have learned, Dale."

Buzzly shrugged. "Some people are born grudge holders, I guess."

"I guess," Curtendon said. "So how is Babs?"

"She's dead, you know," Buzzly said. "Committed suicide two years ago."

Buzzly watched Curtendon's face carefully as he said this. The handsome features registered shock, and Curtendon even began to grin with incredulity. Then the implications of Buzzly's statement began to sink in and the expected sadness came over Curtendon's face, but not quite enough sadness.

"She'd had some nervous trouble," Buzzly went on, "suicidal tendencies. Saw every kind of doc-

tor and took every kind of medicine for three years. Tried to do away with herself several times, and then one day she succeeded."

"That's hard to believe," Curtendon said with unconvincing grief. "She was so—"

"So full of life so recently?" Buzzly interrupted.

Curtendon stared at him with unmistakable anger. "Yes," he said, "I can't believe she's gone."

"Well," Buzzly said, "every step was taken to prevent it, but—" he lowered his palms on the booth's cool table top with finality. "—it happened."

"A pity," Curtendon said. The barely concealed anger had completely displaced the grief, and Buzzly was satisfied.

Curtendon tossed the rest of his drink down and stood, buttoning his well cut sport jacket. "I'd better be going, Dale. Work to catch up on tonight."

"Sure you won't stay for another?" Buzzly asked, noticing that Curtendon's shirt needed pressing and his tie was slightly rumpled.

"No," Curtendon said, shuffling sideways out of the booth. "Like to but I can't."

"Drop by sometime now that you know where I live," Buzzly said, standing. "Apartment 742." He pulled a pen and a slip of

paper from his pocket as he talked.

"I can remember it," Curtendon said dryly. "Be seeing you, Dale." He forced a smile and left.

Still standing, Buzzly finished his martini. Then he went over to the bar.

Billy was wiping off the bar top with a white towel.

"That fellow I was over there with," Buzzly said, "you seen him around much?"

"Ain't seen him around at all."

"He says he stops in here pretty often."

Billy stuffed the towel on a rack invisible behind the bar. "Maybe he just means the building. If he stops in the lounge, here, it ain't while I'm on duty, and I work from three to midnight. Far as I know, he's just been in this once."

"Once too often," Buzzly said under his breath.

"What say, Mr. Buzzly?"

"Nothing," Buzzly said. "I was just wondering about him; he's an old college friend." He turned and left the lounge, walked across the lobby and pressed an elevator button.

The elevator let Buzzly out on the seventh floor and he walked the few feet down the tiled hall to apartment 742. The door was unlocked, as he knew it would be, and he entered without hesitation.

Babs was just finishing setting

the table for supper. "Hello, darling," she said, coming out of the kitchen with two glasses of iced tea. "Be ready to eat in a few minutes."

Buzzly smiled at her. She was an attractive woman in her most attractive years, marred only by the thin, permanently etched lines of nervousness on her pale forehead.

While waiting for her to finish setting the table Buzzly walked idly about, looking at the apartment with new insight. Things were as usual, maybe a bit too much as usual. He went into the half-bath of the master bedroom and washed his hands.

Buzzly sat across from Babs at the dinner table, exchanging pleasantries, stealing admiring glances at her bright eyes and soft blonde hair, waiting until they were half-way through supper before he broached the subject. Then he spoke casually, lowering a bit of steak that he'd speared with his fork and was just lifting from his plate. "You remember Phillip Curtendon, don't you dear?"

Her eyes seemed even brighter as her face paled. "Of course. It's been . . . how long since we've seen him?"

"Oh, five or six years, at least."

She took a sip of iced tea, lifting the glass quickly and jerkily so

Buzzly wouldn't see that her hand trembled. "Whatever made you think of him?"

"He's dead, you know," Buzzly said. "Thought you might have heard about it on the radio. As I was driving home tonight I noticed a crowd and the police just a few blocks down the street. Two of those radio station roving news cars were there, too, and lo and behold I hadn't driven a block past when it was on the news on the car radio. Phillip Curtendon, thirty-three years old, struck and killed by an automobile at Fourteenth and Brent. Nasty business, too. Head got caught between the tire and fender and he was dragged almost a block. Police were sprinkling sawdust all up and down the street."

Buzzly stopped talking as he heard Babs' fork clacking noisily against her wooden salad bowl. She was biting her lower lip so hard that it must bring blood and her eyes were wide and strange. She seemed completely unaware of the fork in her quaking hand.

"Of course," Buzzly went on, "it might not have been our Phillip Curtendon, but then there aren't too many Curtendons."

Babs tried to take another drink of tea but the glass slipped from her hand, bounced off the table edge, and the cold tea spilled onto

the carpet. She only stared at it.

Buzzly rose and walked to her side, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Here, here, now," he said gently. "I didn't think this would upset you so. I'll run down to the pharmacy and get some of your medicine." He crossed the room and slipped into his jacket. Pausing at the door he looked back at her, sitting white and shaken at the table. "I'll be back quick as I can," he said. "Perhaps I'll hear something more about the accident while I'm at the pharmacy."

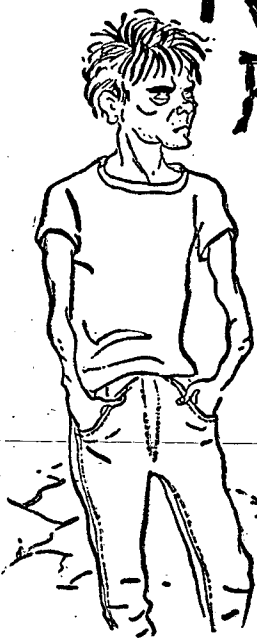
However, Buzzly didn't go to the pharmacy. He got out of the elevator and instead went directly to the lounge. He sat at the bar and ordered a martini.

He was still sitting there a few minutes later when he heard a woman in the lobby near the lounge entrance gasp. Then a man's voice said, "Oh, my God!" and behind him Buzzly heard a rush of feet crossing the lobby floor to the main entrance, then silence.

Buzzly sat calmly sipping his martini, waiting for them to identify the body. It wouldn't be easy, after seven stories. Allowing himself a faint smile into his upraised glass, he wondered what Phillip Curtendon would say when next they met.

One tiny gleam of light in the darkness often can guide one to his destination.

THE KID'S RELIGION



SERGEANT BULL was in the juvenile room of Precinct 10 waiting for Lieutenant Sperle, the detective in charge of the Juvenile Division. According to the desk sergeant, Sperle had taken another pointless

trip into Demon's Alley, one final covering of old ground, to do what Bull himself had been doing the past twelve weeks. They had an informer in Demon's Alley and probably Sperle would whisper the word that he wanted to talk with Kid Kettalos one last time. It was a stupid, idiotic blunder the Kid

was going to pull, one that would automatically shoot the Demons right into the big league and land all six of them into starched blue uniforms for the beginning of the long ride down.

It was six-fifteen before Sperle banged through the door to Juvenile. A few strands of graying hair lay tossed out of place, and the summer's itching heat had his slightly pocked, forty-year-old face shining with sweat.

"Where are all the ash trays around here? What kind of precinct is this a man can't have a smoke?"

"It's the juvenile room," Bull said. "They aren't supposed to be surrounded by bad influences,

by
**JERRY
JACOBSON**

Lieutenant Sperle, remember?"

"Sweet," said Sperle. "So that's why we let them live in Demon's Alley. Sweet. Cost the city fifty thousand to fix that street up to qualify as a slum."

"You saw him," Sergeant Bull said, nudging his near-empty coffee cup toward the center of the

scarred, oak table. "You saw Kid Kettalos."

"I saw him the only way you see a gang leader, through a friend of a friend . . . of a friend." Sperle lighted his cigaret. The first puff he sent out his nostrils like an enraged dragon breathing fire. "You don't have to be a farmer to pick bad apples. I give up on this one."

"So now what?"

"So now we wait for eight o'clock," said Sperle, laughing quietly. "We stake out Freight Street, two miles either side of Demon's Alley. We cover it with twelve men; fifteen, if I can get them." Sperle's hand shot out and snatched up the phone. "Let me have the chief."

During the silence Bull scrutinized Sperle's face. Tension and anger drew forehead lines into tight, even rows and the eyes, reddened from sleeplessness, glowed faintly with vengeance.

"Chief, Lieutenant Sperle. Can you authorize twelve off-duty officers for this Freight Street thing tonight?"

A moment's silence exploded. The ancient clock with its octagonal wooden face clacked loudly off the bare walls. "Work clothes, lunch pails, three or four in taxis, perhaps even an organ grinder. I want Kid Kettalos and I want him

tonight." Then, "Thanks, Chief."

Sperle was lingering on the line; that meant the detail was being authorized and his call was being transferred to the duty sergeant.

"Lieutenant Sperle. I want twelve off-duty officers in the squad room in half an hour. I don't care what they're doing or where they are. Twelve is a minimum, fifteen if you can get me that many. Have four cabs and three unmarks ready to roll by seven-fifteen, and eight sets of work clothes and lunch buckets. Call me back."

Sperle banged the receiver down, then challenged Bull with a stony look. "Bull, you know why you won't make a good detective down here? That is, if you live long enough?"

"Why?"

"Because down here there aren't any good detectives," Sperle spat. "Down here there are only stupid detectives and confused detectives and half-crazed detectives. Next month I'll be forty. Four weeks' vacation, and all I can think is where is a good, quiet place to go to have my nervous breakdown."

Bull said nothing. To speak would be like touching an overheating boiler, and it was too hot a night to get burned.

"Bull, you weren't around, were you, when the Kettalos kid was

growing up into the punk he is?"
"No, sir."

"No, of course you weren't. Well, when the Kettalos kid was becoming a man, at twelve, you were a damn sight far from one at eighteen, all scrubbed and nifty, eating up those lectures at the university—the social origins of neurosis, the social forces in the development of crime. Down in the Freight Street District Kid Kettalos was getting his education; too; a twelve-year-old bagman, training on the job; protection, numbers, the ponies. Twelve years old—at that age most other kids are still adding numbers together, and think all ponies are for riding around a ring for a nickel."

"That was seven years ago," Bull said. "People can change, people like Kid Kettalos."

Sperle looked up quickly, then threw his spent cigaret into Bull's coffee cup so harshly Bull expected it to bounce right back out. "Get one thing straight, Bull," he said. "People like Kid Kettalos don't change. Physically you'll see differences—new tallness, added weight, a decided change in the facial appearance—but the insides of them are rotted right to the marrow."

"And that's the reason we have rehabilitation," ventured Bull, "because there's no hope they'll ever

... get religion. No hope at all."

Sperle, his temper controlled, said, "Kid Kettalos already has a religion. He's a misfit, a square peg. His religion is his pride in being alienated, of playing the game against all the rules. No, you don't rehabilitate the ones like Kettalos. The best you can hope for is containment; and if not containment, then confinement. You just try to keep them out of the public's hair, one way or the other."

Bull rose and walked to a window, the dirt and grime of the years still clinging to it on the outside. The inside of these windows were cleaned, but never the outside. With juveniles like Kid Kettalos, Sperle's theory worked just the opposite. You left the inside alone and just cleaned up on the outside, the tough way.

When Bull swung around again, Sperle said, "If you don't like the way I run my section, I can have you transferred back to squad-car duty. Just say the word."

"And get a nice big black mark in the Chief's book?" Bull said. "No thanks. You're the boss."

"I'm glad to see we have an understanding."

"We don't have an understanding," said Bull. "All we have is the observance and precedence of the pecking order, isn't that about

the size of things around here?"

Sperle smiled shortly. "You're a new detective, Bull, with new ideas they crammed into your brain in college. Well, this isn't the campus quadrangle, it's Precinct 10, the last stop on the way to Hell itself. So, don't make waves, Bull. Make arrests, make studies of the criminal mind and its origins, if you want. But don't make waves."

"I'll keep it in my mind," said Bull.

"Good. Now let's talk a little about what may or may not occur tonight," said Sperle. "The Manus Company fur shipment is due to roll through Freight Street and Demon's Alley at roughly eight o'clock tonight. The word leaked out, giving Kettalos time to set up a hit."

"How do you know the Demons are out to pull a stunt like that?"

Sperle lowered his eyes, condescendingly. "As you say around campus, it's academic. Brentson has been undercover in Demon Alley, and various members of the Demons have been mouthing off about this hit all week."

"This pushes them over into the bigtime," said Bull. "Kettalos knows that, and I don't think he's ready for that kind of life."

"You have his word of honor," said Sperle.

"It's still a long time until eight o'clock."

"An hour and a half," said Sperle, sharply. "We'll go on the premise that he's going to pull the job—if that's all right with you."

Bull nodded, and Sperle pulled a notepad from his pocket. "You'll make the assignments for the stake-outs along Freight Street," he told Bull. "The Demons rarely go out of their own territory, so keep that in mind when you begin placing your people. Sometime before eight o'clock you may begin getting calls on trouble involving other gangs. The Switchers will be one, over on Drukker Street, and maybe the Cougars, on Royman Street. These hoods help each other out quite a bit, so whatever comes up may be strictly diversionary, to get you and as many officers as possible out of Freight Street. Make no error about it, Bull. Kettalos is a smart apple, one who'll pull anything if it will give him an advantage, so I want you to get a report from the trouble-area first, before you go scattering people to the four winds."

Sperle droned on with his instructions, but in the gray quiet of the juvenile room Bull was hardly listening. His mind was on Kid Kettalos, and how Bull had nearly brought him up out of that

nightmare world of litter and junkies and helpless cries in the night; almost.

It had been the previous June, a scorcher, the night hissing with heavy heat and the stench of the slums. Bull was off-duty that night, heading up the stairs of the Drukker Street Y.M.C.A., his handball gear bulging in a small canvas bag.

As Bull mounted the worn concrete stairs, the bone-thin figure of Kid Kettalos caught his eye. He was leaning against the red brick where the alley split the gym from the tenements, one slim hand thrust into the slash pocket on a black leather jacket, while the other brought a cigaret up to the tightly set mouth.

"Little out of your territory, ain't you, cop?" Kettalos jeered as he stepped forward out of the shadows. "This is Switchers ground, or didn't you know?"

"I'll be careful," Bull said politely.

"They'll slice off that copperhead of yours and hang it on a hydrant to scare little boys."

Bull said nothing as Kettalos leered suspiciously up at the building. "What they got going on in there, cop?" he said after a moment. "You guys open up a branch rubber hose office?"

"It's a gymnasium," Bull said.

"Basketball, volleyball, handball—"

"I know what it is," Kettalos sniffed. "Sports. Only creeps play sports, stupid games where you don't win nothing but a sweaty forehead and athlete's foot. The pros, now, they got the right idea. If you're sap enough to play sports, play for loot, or don't play at all."

"You've got all the answers all right," said Bull. "No pantywaist sports for a guy who's got better things to do with his time."

"Exactly right, cop."

For a few revealing seconds, Bull thought he saw the cruel, condescending eyes favor the tall front of the Drukker Street "Y", as though the heart of him were prodding the brain to go up the steps and inside. Bull knew the book on Kettalos as well as he knew his own past history. Public school dropout at fourteen, he had a secret love for sports few knew existed in him. But Bull knew it existed, knew it ever since that weekend night at the Sports Palace when, at halftime of the local college's basketball game, Bull had turned a corner and run smack into the taut, rawboned face of Kettalos the sports-hater. For a moment they had confronted each other as the eternal, classic pair: law-upholder versus law-breaker. Kettalos, in the face of Bull and in the face of his professed hatred

for sports, noticeably smiled, his face blushing such a lively, vivid red it could have started its own fire. Then the crowd, surging for hot dogs and coffee, pushed each his separate way and apart for the rest of the evening, but the chink in Kid Kettalos' armor had been found. He might have been true to his way of life, sneaking in by a side door or through a locker room window, but his colors were now flying higher and brighter in the air than an American flag in a parade.

Now, in the still, oppressive summer air, Bull said, "I've got time for a warm-up game before my partner shows up. How about it, Kettalos?"

"A game of what?"

"Handball."

"Kiddy stuff," said Kettalos, the darting eyes taking a quick check up and down the street, telling Bull the Kid had a previous engagement. "Batting a little rubber ball around. Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker's man, eh, cop?"

"Only take you half an hour to find out," Bull said.

The Kid looked preoccupied. "Gimme a raincheck, okay, cop? In a few minutes I gotta see somebody about a matter."

"Wouldn't be Sam Sabbo, would it?" Bull asked absently. Sabbo was Kettalos' opposite number,

leader of the Switchers; a swift flicker of recognition in Kettalos' eyes told Bull he had guessed right. Bull gestured toward the building.

"There's a boxing ring in there," he said, "if your little matter is a physical one."

"No rumble," Kettalos said. "We're just gonna have a little conference. No action this time. Just talk."

"If you finish early," Bull said, starting up the stairs, "I'll be inside. Second floor, court one. I've got an extra pair of gloves and an old pair of tennis shoes."

"Don't hold your breath, cop."

"Unless, of course, you think you might be getting in over your head," Bull said.

The Kid huffed. "Handball? That's like walking on top of the water, cop. Patty-cake, patty-cake."

"I'll wait for you and we'll see."

"Don't count on it, cop, okay?"

Bull did count on it, changing into his gym shorts and shoes slowly, his ears perked for the familiar sound of Kid Kettalos' shuffling gait out in the hallway. A few seconds later the door to the locker room was opening and Kettalos was standing in the opening, the cold eyes suspiciously scanning the room. It was a real moment for Bull, nearly an epoch. For the first time in over a year

he'd gotten Kid Kettalos out of his own territory and into Bull's.

"This is it, huh?" Kettalos said. The harsh eyes roved condescendingly over dilapidated steel lockers, long, well-nicked wooden benches, and the concrete floor veined with long cracks and littered with paper and towels and chips of soap. "Not much of a place. My walkup's cleaner, and I got stuff in it that ain't been touched for generations."

"It's not the Athletic Club, but it serves a purpose," Bull said. "You can change in the locker next to mine."

"My own private cockroach, too?"

Without gym trunks, Kettalos stripped to his waist, revealing surprisingly muscular shoulders and biceps that, if not bulging, were solid and compact.

"These my shoes and gloves?" Kettalos said, pointing to the items Bull laid out on a bench. "Little hairy looking, aren't they?"

"You aren't paying any rental on them, you know."

The face smiled with quick defensiveness and a hand rose in the air. "Don't drive yourself crazy, cop," Kettalos said. "Just a little joke. Don't drive yourself crazy."

Upstairs on the second floor, Bull ushered Kid Kettalos into a large room, vacant and silent,

with a shining floor of maple, and four walls and a ceiling of concrete painted a sparkling white, the lower four feet of the front wall dotted and streaked with countless evidences of kill-shots that had been slammed there over the years.

Struggling into his gloves, Kettalos looked at the room with cool disdain. "Not much," he said, the words echoing hollowly. "Just a room. Couple of lines on the floors, lots of bare walls. Looks a lot like the Screw Room down in Juvenile."

"Except that here nobody's going to ask you any questions," Bull said. "Here, you just play the game."

"Okay. So let's play. Where's the ball?"

Bull produced a rubber ball, hard and black and very lethal looking. He tossed it Kettalos' way and the kid caught it in one hand with careless skill and looked it over. "Hard as a rock," he noted. "Like a golf ball. Little bigger, though. Bet if you ever got hit square between the eyes, the thing'd kill you."

"That's a possibility," Bull admitted.

Kettalos noted the lines on the floor and asked about them.

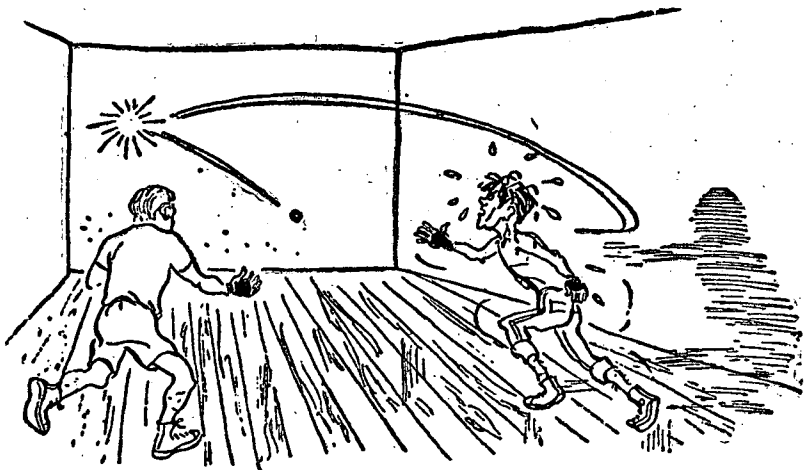
"The front one is the service line," Bull instructed, "and the one

a few feet behind it has to be cleared on the serve for it to be legal."

"It's all a bit complicated to fathom," the Kid said, humming condescendingly through stained teeth, "but I *think* I got it. So, let's play ball. That's what I came to do."

They played, but the games to 21 points didn't last long, perhaps only ten minutes. The sound thrashing. Bull administered to Kettalos wasn't because of the Kid's lack of athletic ability. He knew how to follow a ball and how to hit it and how to follow through, but that was mastery of barely a third of the game. Unfortunately, embarrassingly, he was at a total loss trying to read the angles and speeds at which the ball flew at him, sometimes after contacting three different walls, plus the ceiling, just for good measure. Yes, it was perfectly legal to use the ceiling, Bull told him, as long as the ball contacted the front wall, before it hit the floor. Kid Kettalos' black hair hung around his head in small strands of frustration and humiliation. His chest glowed beet red with foolish exertion and from too many cigarettes. When he peeled off his gloves his hands shook as though they were palsied.

"Another game?" Bull asked.



The eyes turned on him in rage. "Another . . . what? You aren't even sweating! Not a crummy drop!"

"I've learned how to conserve my moves," Bull said.

"And I haven't, I suppose," Kettalos leered.

"You'll learn—if you keep at it long enough."

Bull glanced down as the gloves were tossed at his feet with a slap against the maple floor.

"You know what I'd rather do, cop? You know what I'd enjoy more than this stupid, damn game? I'd rather sit on my stoop over in The Alley and jab a sharp stick in my ear. All day long! You know who this crummy game is for? Idiots. Idiots and cops. I'll leave your beat-up shoes in the locker room . . . and don't

bother to call us. We'll call you!"

What Bull wanted was not Kid Kettalos' humiliated defeat but his salvation. The kid needed a new religion, something to take the place of his lawlessness, something toward which he could redirect his hatred. He had hoped the Kid could eventually be swayed into packing his hatred for society inside a tiny rubber ball and then whack the harmless hell out of it.

Making Kid Kettalos over, and redirecting his rage, was like watching for a pot of water to boil. To Bull's way of thinking, handball wasn't the best way in the world to do it. It was a physically punishing and demanding sport, one which showed no mercy on players who smoked or drank too much, or used the hours reserved for sleep for carousing and

night-hawking, the very things Kid Kettalos held dear in life; but there were positive signs, signs like the new pair of gloves and tennis shoes Kettalos bought (or had stolen) and the gradual disappearance of the red lettering on the handball Bull had given him. The most positive, encouraging sign of all, however, was Kettalos' name unmistakably listed for a court reservation every Tuesday night.

Then had come the setback, one which Bull, had he wanted to, could have averted. After three months of steady improvement in Kettalos' game, along with three months of a correspondingly steady diminishment in his delinquency and lawlessness, it came in the form of a match challenge, issued Bull one noon as he rode surveillance through Demon's Alley. At a corner stop sign, the bony, half-frightening face of Kettalos popped up out of nowhere beyond the car window. Bull rolled down the glass on a face grinning with revenge.

"Eight o'clock tonight, okay, cop? And you better bring an extra towel. With all the sweatin' and cryin' you're gonna be doing, you'll need it!"

Kettalos had played that night like a windmill gone insane. Bull, in fact, had never seen him play

better, serving and hitting his shots with calculation, as well as savage brutality. As the game wore on there was no doubt that Kettalos was out to whip Bull—or pass out or die trying.

They split the first two games. In the third, Bull saw his comfortable eight-point lead whittled to one by Kettalos' fierce determination, and then to the epitome of closeness, a 20-20 tie, with Bull finally managing to take the serve from the Kid.

As Bull stepped up to the line to serve he became instinctively aware of the situation's great importance. Kettalos had never beaten Bull in a three-game match, and now he was as close to that milestone as winning back the serve and scoring a single point. Bull was also aware of the relative impossibility of this occurring. Sensing victory, he knew he would be presenting Kettalos with his fastest, lowest, best-placed serve all evening, and Kettalos was spent, his arms, weary from continuous play, hanging like dangling rope at his sides.

The raspy, winded voice said, "Match-point, eh, cop? So, serve! Serve and let's get this thing over with!"

For a moment, with the ball cupped in his left hand, Bull hesitated. It wouldn't take much to

miss-hit his serve, a split second's glance up from the ball as he hit it, a double fault close enough not to cause suspicion, a setup serve Kettalos could easily return, but he couldn't take the chance of Kettalos suspecting the match was being handed to him. Were that to happen it would destroy all that he'd been working for, all the attention, all his attempts at rehabilitating a life-long delinquent no one had ever lifted a hand to help. So Bull did the only thing he could do with the circumstances given. He coiled, bending low, and then exploded into the last point of the game, an ace, hugging the floor of the court with blistering speed and passing Kettalos before he had even set himself in the proper, sideways stance for return—but it was not the last shot of the match.

The final blow came from Kettalos himself, in the form of a fist, striking on Bull's left temple, once, twice, and then once more, so fast Bull was only slightly aware he was being struck. Walls tumbled about him, and his ears were jammed with dull ringing. When he awoke, it was to the sight of a pair of handball gloves and a pair of nearly new tennis shoes, empty. Kettalos was gone.

Bull returned the shoes and gloves to Demon's Alley and let

the matter drop. By doing so he had hoped Kettalos would get the message that all was forgiven, but they never played handball again.

Now, in an unmarked cruiser in Freight Street, a block from Demon's Alley, in the darkness between light poles, Bull sat quietly next to Lieutenant Sperle, thinking about the message he, like Sperle, had tried to get out to Kettalos, wondering if it would do any good. He doubted very much that it would.

"You've done a pretty good job of placement," Sperle told him. "The Demons won't know what hit them."

"There's still a chance they won't pull it."

"Slim," said Sperle, "but then we don't get paid for making educated guesses."

Bull said nothing but got out of the car and stretched, casting his eyes up and down Freight Street. A dark cat, its fur mangy and sticking up like porcupine quills, darted across his field of vision and disappeared into a black square of alley entrance, a dead-end alley, its culmination the red brick west wall of the Ricotti Theater. A bigger, blacker cat pursued, plunging into the same opening. The first cat would be going nowhere, like Kettalos, both trapped by a stupid decision.

"Better get back inside, Bull," came Spërle's voice from inside the car. "It's almost seven forty-five."

Bull pointed toward a dimly lit all-night drugstore a quarter block distant. "I'm out of cigarets," he said. "Be back in a minute."

It was only three blocks to Drukker Street and to shorten the distance, Bull took alleys, feeling the heavy heat on his forehead, and smelling overcooked pork and cabbage still lingering on the windless air. He was pursuing a slim chance, a slender beam of hope nearly invisible, but he had to give it opportunity to happen.

There was no one on Drukker Street when Bull approached it. Two street lights guarding the front of the Drukker Street Y.M.C.A. sent their soft, dull light up the side of the gray building. At the bottom of the stairs his heart dipped to his stomach as he thought how foolish this last-ditch effort might seem to Spërle on paper—and then an object moved on the side of the dark building.

"Hello, cop. Been catchin' many robbers lately?"

Bull set his face in an attempt to keep his relief hidden. "I'm filling my quota," he said, without expression.

Kid Kettalos came out of the

shadows. At his shoulder hung a second visitor, one Bull recognized dimly but couldn't immediately name.

"Big night," Kettalos commented loosely. "I'm in demand. Calls, notes, messages—I feel like one of your movie idols."

"Fur shipment coming through Freight Street tonight at eight o'clock," Bull told him. "We just thought you'd like to know."

Kettalos chuckled softly. "That's real news, cop. The Titanic went down, too. You hear about that?"

"I heard a rumor," Bull said. "I also heard a rumor the Demons were out to sink a fur truck. Any truth to that?"

"What if there is?" Kettalos asked.

"If there is, it's a dead end and a free ride to Bar City," Bull said.

"Elementary, Watlick," the Kid slurred, bold and blustery as ever, but Bull noticed he was having trouble looking him squarely in the eye.

A short, tight silence passed. Then Kettalos coughed.

"Listen, I'm sorry about what happened here last month," he told Bull, the sincerity making making Bull's stomach go soft. "I lost my head, went a little whacko, you know?"

"Forget it," Bull said. "I have."

"Your message said you wanted

to take it out on me on the courts," Kettalos said. "That on the level?"

"If you call off that hit tonight."

"Call it off?" breezed Kettalos lowly. "It was never on. That's crazy stuff, kid stuff. Oh, we kicked it around a few months ago, made it a big topic of conversation, you know? But I nixed it all the way. I mean, that kinda stuff is numbers across your chest-ville, you know what I mean?"

"Sperle's got Freight Street staked out like a freeway job," Bull said.

"He's gonna have a long, dull night," said Kettalos, with a little grin.

They started up the steps, Bull thankful that the long night was ending. Inside the building he would call Precinct 10 from a pay phone and have the desk sergeant relay to Sperle what he had been hoping and searching for all these years, the new social beginning for Kid Kettalos.

"This guy is Sam Sabbo," Kettalos, embarrassed, introduced. "He's the leader of the Drukker

Street Switchers and he don't believe nothin' until he sees it with his own two eyes."

Sabbo's nod came graced with a slight frown, for an instant plunging Bull back into the past when it had been Kettalos walking with him up these stairs. The two frowns could not have been more identical.

"He doesn't believe they got a game called handball," Bull said. "That right?"

"And he don't believe it gets any hotter than hopscotch, either," said Kettalos. "Sissy stuff, is what the creep thinks."

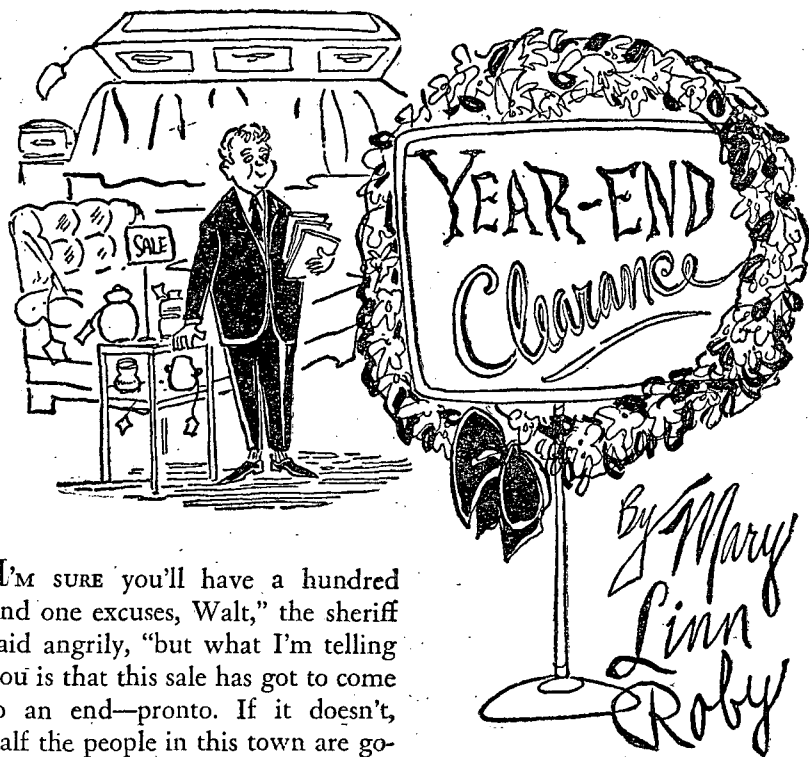
"We'll give him a little demonstration," Bull said, "and then you can get him out there and show him what the game's all about."

"Yeah," Kettalos said, the smile thinly displayed at the taste of possible victory tonight. "After I make a little fodder out of you, cop."

Sperle wouldn't believe any of it, but in this, the worst of all possible worlds, it was not a too impossible dream to make come true.



An advantageous sale is easily recognized, it seems, although some buyers must be goaded to participate.



I'M SURE you'll have a hundred and one excuses, Walt," the sheriff said angrily, "but what I'm telling you is that this sale has got to come to an end—pronto. If it doesn't, half the people in this town are going to be dead." He pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and snapped it open. "Whoever heard of such a thing?" he roared. "Look at this. 'Giant January Clearance Sale. Once in a Lifetime Bargains!' I never heard of anything so disgusting."

"Everybody does it," Walt insisted. "Every other businessman in town gets rid of merchandise that way. Why should I be different?"

"Because you're an undertaker!"

the sheriff shouted. "Undertakers don't have end of the year sales."

"I don't see why not," Walt pouted. He was a big man with a crest of black hair and shaggy eyebrows, and spoke as he did everything else, slowly and deliberately. "I've got all these caskets. I want to unload," he said. "I need new stock. And it's not just caskets, but visitor's books, crematory jars. You ought to see some of those jars, Ned. For only one hundred and fifty, plus tax, I can sell you one of the most beautiful—"

"Now don't get carried away!" Sheriff Harlow mopped his face with his handkerchief. His face was crimson. "It isn't as simple as you make it seem," he said. "Not by a long shot."

Walt looked at his friend questioningly. "All right, Ned," he said. "You just go ahead and explain. It ain't like you to come between a man and his business. Not unless you've changed in the last five years."

Five years ago Ned Harlow had decided to marry, after many a comfortable year of bachelorhood. Walt had tried to warn him, but to no avail. The marriage with Miss Netta Parsons from Peaksville had been a disaster from the moment she had told Ned to speak up when he had fumbled his marriage vows.

Netta was a strong minded woman. She kept Ned's house spotless and cleaned up his language, and she got rid of all his undesirable old friends—including Walt.

That had been a painful time. Walt and Ned had spent every Thursday evening of their adulthood hunched over a checkerboard, a glass of cold beer in one hand and a pipe in the other. Ned hadn't known, until it was over, what the friendship had meant.

Oh, he had put up a fight at first. He had tried telling Netta she couldn't choose his friends, that she could make life as miserable as she wanted for him, but he intended to keep on playing checkers with Walt. Yet Netta was a clever woman. She began to spread rumors around town about Walt's work. She told some dreadful stories of jobs not properly done, and spoke with enthusiasm about the undertaker over in Peaksville. The words of a sheriff's wife counted for something in a small town like Taunton, so Ned finally had to give up or see Walt's business ruined.

As a consequence it had been five years since Ned had been in this room. It was a comfortable old study; a man's room. The checker table was still set up in the corner by the fireplace. Forgetting for a moment what he was there to say, he looked at it wistfully.

"I don't play much anymore," Walt told him. "Now and then Jake Barker drops in, but I'm always so tensed up waiting for him to cheat that I can't concentrate on my game." He looked at the sheriff, his eyes sparkling. "Say, couldn't this business of yours wait? We could sit down and have a beer and maybe play a game of checkers."

The sheriff shook his head regretfully. "The thing about this sale of yours is this, Walt," he said. "The death rate in Taunton has gone up sky high in the past week. Don't tell me you hadn't noticed."

Walt rubbed his chin reflectively. "Well, it's true that I haven't had a free minute since I put that ad in the paper last Monday, but what's wrong with that? It's just darn lucky for all these people being able to take advantage of my January clearance."

"I wish you'd stop calling it that!" Ned snapped. "Didn't it strike you as too much of a coincidence that everybody should start dying this week?"

Walt stared at him blankly. "What are you getting at, Ned?"

"I've got reason to think that these people who are lying in your half-price caskets didn't all die natural deaths. In fact, it's my bet that darn few of them did."

It took Walt a long time to digest this. He tapped out his pipe on the

mantelpiece and sucked at it reflectively. "You're not trying to tell me," he said, "that some of those folks in the next room were murdered."

"I'm trying to tell you just that!" Walt exploded. "And there's going to be ructions around here soon if these deaths don't stop."

"But they've been accidents mostly," Walt told him earnestly. "Sarah Hardesty fell off her back porch and broke her neck, and Wes Gammet, well, everyone's known for a long time that if he didn't stop messing around with that canned heat he was going to get himself in trouble. And Tom Franklin—"

"It's more than a coincidence," the sheriff insisted. "They're a bit too clever for me, I'll grant you. So far. There hasn't been a case of poisoning yet, or anything you could prove was out of the way, but the fact of the matter is that these people who are dying are people that other folk have wanted to see dead for a long time—relatives and such who have to pay the funeral costs."

"Well," Walt said slowly, "that might be true, but I still don't see why I should stop my sale."

"Take Sarah Hardesty," the sheriff said patiently. "Everyone knows she left twenty thousand to her nephew Jake."

Walt smiled. "Good old Jake. He was up for Christmas, wasn't he?"

"He certainly was!" Ned shouted. "Just in time to push her off the back porch and collect the money. Now, you take Wes Gammet. He went off that canned heat five years ago, after he wound up in the hospital. But lately he took up with Grayson Brackett's wife, and there's some who think they saw Grayson with him down by the railway tracks the night Wes died."

He took a deep breath. "And there was Frank Cram. He's been working in that box mill for near on twenty-five years. Strikes me pretty odd that he chose this week to lose his balance by the saw. I don't suppose I can prove that the fact Wilber Parker was standing right behind him when he fell has anything to do with Frank ending up like a sliced sausage, but—"

"Frank was a hard one to fix up proper," Walt admitted. "Wouldn't want to work that way every day. But I see your point. Frank was telling all around town that Wilber doesn't pay his bills, wasn't he?"

"You've got it!" the sheriff said. "Now my point is, if you don't call off that sale—"

The phone rang and Walt went to answer it.

"Yes," he said. "Well now, that is shocking, isn't it? A real shame . . .

Yes . . . Yes . . . Well, I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am. I'll be right over."

The two men looked into one another's eyes as Walt hung up the phone.

"Was that another one?" Ned demanded.

Walt nodded. "Lucy Crocket's gone. Seems she fell into the mill pond."

The sheriff shook his head. "Well, there's one that will be impossible to prove. Everyone in town hated Lucy. Guess she's slandered everyone at one time or another. Walt, this should prove it, if nothing else does. Even if there's just the chance of a tie-in, you can't go on with this sale."

"I suppose you're right," Walt said. "It's a pretty sad thing, Ned, that folks around here would be taking advantage of my sale this way. Pity. I've got some lovely oak caskets. Pink satin lining, big fancy pillows. Overbought them back in '58—forgot that folks around here want things simple if they have to pay for them. Now they're going to lose out on a real buy. It's not just the goods, it's the services, too. This week it was going to cost just one third what it usually does to have the grave dug."

The phone rang again. Walt answered it.

"It's your wife, Ned," he said, looking sadder than ever. "She

wants to talk to you, sounds mad."

That woman has built in radar, Ned decided. He hadn't told her that he was going to see Walt today, and here she was on the phone when he hadn't been here ten minutes, wanting him to come home.

Her voice shrilled through the room. That was like Netta to say those things about Walt, knowing he could hear. The two men stood close together, Ned holding the receiver out a little from his ear. Every time she stopped he said, "Yes, dear. Yes, dear."

When the sheriff hung up, he stood looking at his old friend for a long minute.

Walt was slow, but not as slow as all that. "You know," he said happily, "it wouldn't hurt all that much to let the sale go one more

day, would it? Might even help."

Everyone in Taunton said that Netta Harlow had one of the fanciest funerals they'd ever seen. No expenses spared, and, what with the sale and all, that meant plenty of extras. Walt really outdid himself.

The automobile accident hadn't done any real damage anyhow when the brakes had given on Potter's Hill—just broke her neck, nice and clean.

Walt didn't have so much business with the sale over, and things sort of settled back. In fact, he and Ned decided that they might as well play checkers on Monday and Thursday nights both, now that the end-of-the-year clearance was over.



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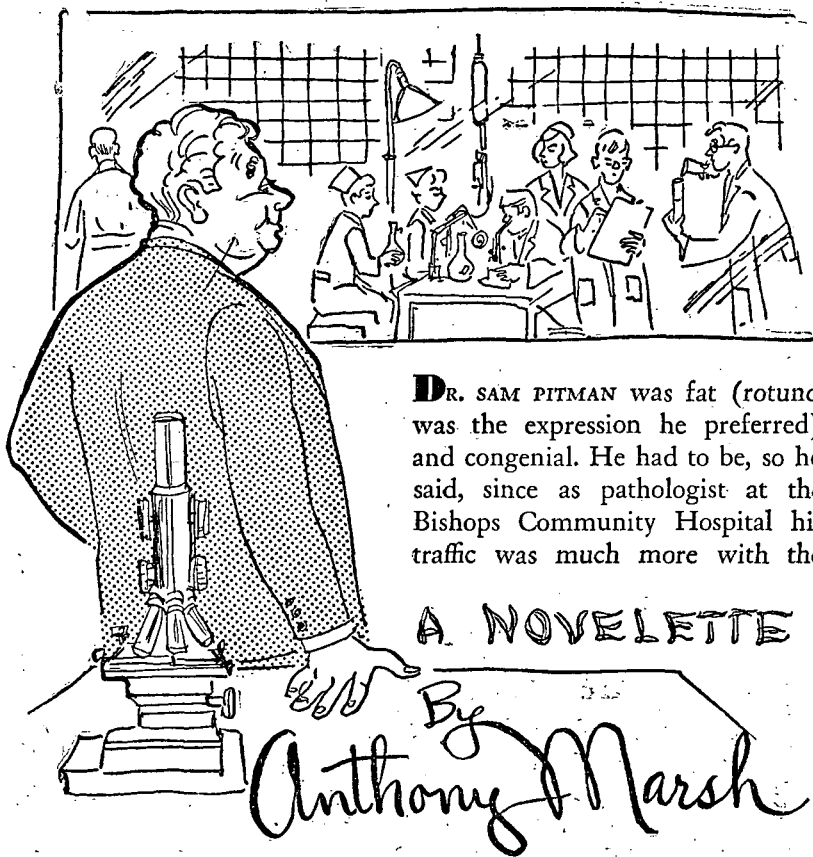
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Considered logistically, happenstance is, of necessity, merely the culmination of converging circumstances.

ONE DEADLY



DR. SAM PITMAN was fat (rotund was the expression he preferred) and congenial. He had to be, so he said, since as pathologist at the Bishops Community Hospital his traffic was much more with the

A NOVELETTE

By
Anthony Marsh

dead than with the living, and being rotund and congenial was his only defense against falling into a morbid frame of mind. Not that he was incapable of unpleasant emotions; his secretary, Miss Plumbley, had the faculty of arous-

SIN



ing in him the deepest anger. As he passed through the outer office of the pathology department that morning she was seated at her desk nonchalantly filing her already over-manicured fingernails.

Stuffing his feelings, Sam bid her a curt good morning, then passed through to his own office. This was a large room where he kept his files, textbooks and high-powered microscope. It was a center point of the department; the wall facing his desk consisted in its upper part of a thick glass panel through which he could overlook

the laboratory. Here the technicians, men and women, mostly young, sat at the long workbenches or walked busily up and down the aisles attending to their duties. They all wore the same knee-length white coats, which gave the place a sort of science fiction aspect. The thick glass of the panel filtered out most of the sound, so that, staring through it, he had the impression of watching a silent movie.

He sat at his desk in quiet frustration for several minutes. He had wanted to fire Miss Plumbley long ago, much to the amazement of some of his colleagues, but the power that maintained Miss Plumbley on her unwelcome pedestal was the gay, debonair Bob Marlowe, president of the medical staff. No staff employee could be hired or fired without the consent of the medical executive committee, and if the president said no, the executive committee said no; that is the way things were done at the Bishops Community Hospital, particularly while the president was Bob Marlowe.

To work, Sam Pitman told himself and, purely out of habit, opened the door at the far side of his office which connected it with the brightly lighted autopsy room. He stared for about three seconds, then withdrew hastily and stormed

back to the outer office resolutely.

"Miss Plumbley!" His voice boomed with anger, but she looked across at him calmly, almost impertinently.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Why didn't you inform me there was a body in there for post-mortem examination?"

"But there isn't, Doctor."

"Don't tell me there isn't. I say there is. It's your job to notify me of these things. I'd have come in a little earlier if I'd known. The relatives or the funeral directors may be waiting for the body."

"But there isn't a body," she said, fiercely.

He gripped her arm. "Come on, I'll show you."

Miss Plumbley drew back. Although for the past ten months she had worked little more than twenty feet from the autopsy room, she had never actually been in there. She turned pale and pulled her arm free. "O.K. I'll take your word for it."

"Then where are the papers? Where is the relative's consent? Where is the chart? How am I supposed to know what I'm looking for? What have you done with the clinical record?"

She dropped the nail file into the open top drawer and began rummaging through the papers on her desk. There were not many

on it, and it rapidly became obvious that she had no information at all about this particular corpse.

Dr. Pitman stamped out angrily and returned to the autopsy room. The body was laid out on the special white-tiled table and covered with a white sheet that drooped halfway to the floor.

Dr. Pitman pulled away the top of the sheet and stepped back, horrified; he was staring into the familiar features, still debonair though not so gay in death, of Bob Marlowe. He threw the sheet over the face again and strode back to Miss Plumbley's office. Trembling, he leaned against the door jamb.

"Do you know whose body that is?"

She was finally showing some signs of concern. "No, Doctor."

"It's Dr. Marlowe!"

Her deep blue eyes opened wide, and her pouting lips fell apart. "Dr. Robert Marlowe?"

"Yes, Robert Marlowe, the president of the medical staff. My God, I saw him only last night; he presided at the monthly staff meeting. He must have been admitted during the night and died. Surely you've got some record, Miss Plumbley."

She began to leaf rather stupidly once again through the sparse papers on her desk.

He exploded, "For heaven's sake, stop dawdling. You're the most incompetent person I've ever met." He strode out into the corridor and to the opposite side of the hospital where the admissions office was located.

An alert, middle-aged woman in an immaculate nurse's uniform looked up at him. "Good morning, Dr. Pitman. My, what's the matter? You don't look well."

"I'm all right, Mrs. Rogers." He sat down heavily in the chair opposite her. "When was Dr. Marlowe admitted? Who's his doctor?"

"Dr. Marlowe?"

"Yes, he was admitted as a patient here. Which ward did he go to?"

"It must have been before I came on. Let me look at the book." She ran an efficient finger down the huge ledger in front of her. "No, I can't see his name here. When would he have been admitted?"

"It must have been after eleven o'clock last night; that's when the staff meeting ended; I saw him there as I was going out."

She ran her finger down the list again. "There were only four admissions during the night, one obstetrical, one child with appendicitis, one woman of sixty-nine with a stroke, and a man from a street accident."

"Who was the man?"

"His name is Donald Griffith. He's twenty-four."

"Nobody else?"

"No. There must be a mistake somewhere."

"There's no mistake, Mrs. Rogers. Dr. Marlowe's body is lying in my autopsy room right now."

Her jaw dropped. "Dr. Robert Marlowe?"

"Yes, the staff president. If *you* don't have a record of it, maybe he was brought in dead and taken straight to the autopsy room, though it ought to be a coroner's case."

She was looking very distressed. "They're supposed to notify this office anyway so that we can keep our census in order. Gracious me, what could have happened? Poor Dr. Marlowe. Perhaps they know about it in emergency. Let's go and check."

He followed her to the emergency department. The front desk was empty, and she sat down to study the record book, a ledger similar to her own. The young nurse in charge came out. "Did you have any D.O.A.s during the night?" Mrs. Rogers asked her.

The girl shook her head. "No, there's nothing in the book."

"I can't see it either," said Mrs. Rogers.

Dr. Pitman was growing frantic. "Did anybody at all die during

the night? Anyone of the patients?"

They both shook their heads.

He pinched his thick cheek. "I must be seeing things. Would you mind coming back and looking at the body with me, Mrs. Rogers?"

"Of course, Doctor." She fell in to step beside him.

Miss Plumbley was standing nervously at the door of her office as though ready to flee the ghost of the departed staff president. Mrs. Rogers gave her a nod, but Dr. Pitman walked by without seeming to notice her. They passed through his office where a few curious eyes glanced at them through the glass panel. He went ahead of her into the autopsy room, stretched out his arm, hesitated for a brief moment, then drew back the white sheet. Mrs. Rogers gasped.

"My goodness, it is Dr. Marlowe. How did he get here?"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to find out ever since I arrived in the hospital this morning."

"But it's impossible, Doctor."

He dropped the sheet back into place. "We can't both be crazy, Mrs. Rogers."

She stepped backward haltingly. He followed her out of the room and closed the door. They sat down on either side of his desk, saying nothing for several

seconds. There were more eyes looking at them through the glass.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He tightened his lips. "I don't know. This situation is entirely without precedent."

"Perhaps you could discuss it with Dr. Rochester. I know he's in the house; he passed by my office a minute or two before you came along."

"Yes, I suppose he would be the best man. He's vice-president of the staff." He picked up the phone and dialed the switchboard. "Would you page Dr. Vaughan Rochester for me?"

Dr. Rochester's name came over the loudspeakers, and a few moments later he had answered his page.

"This is Sam Pitman," said the pathologist. "Could you come right over to my office; something very serious has happened."

"I'll be there immediately," Dr. Rochester answered.

There was a short delay, then he came in, a big man, over six feet tall, and broad shouldered, with square features and close cropped gray hair. He had been quite an athlete in his day and still looked very husky. He moved with the athlete's smooth precision, but there was a deep, fixed intensity in his gaze.



"What's going on, Sam? Why did you send for me?"

Dr. Pitman was tired of reciting his piece. "Come with me," he said briefly.

He hastened into the autopsy room, Dr. Rochester walking sedately behind him. Without ceremony he uncovered the face of the dead doctor.

"Bob Marlowe," said Dr. Rochester in a matter of fact tone.

"My God, is that all you can find to say?"

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold . . ."

"Look, Vaughan, this is no time for a prayer meeting. What are we going to do? We have no idea how he got here."

Mrs. Rogers, who had followed them as far as the door, was pointing to a chair in the far corner. "What's that over there?"

Sam Pitman went across to the chair. Arranged on the seat was a set of clothes, neatly folded, the shoes on top. He touched them gingerly. "They're Bob's clothes. That's the light gray suit he was wearing last night, and I'd recognize those Italian woven shoes anywhere."

Dr. Rochester had followed him and was leaning over his shoulder. "Yes, they're Bob's clothes, no question about it."

Dr. Pitman stared at his colleague's immobile features incredulously. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Do? You're the pathologist here. The man's in your department, all ready for you. Get on with your examination and find out what he died of."

"But I don't have any records. I don't even have a consent for an autopsy."

"Then get one. Call up Mrs. Marlowe. I'm sure she'll be quite willing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some patients waiting for me upstairs." He walked out as though this were a morning like any other morning.

Dr. Pitman almost staggered back to his office and collapsed into his chair. The nurse seated herself opposite him. "Mrs. Rogers," he said, "Tell me quite frankly, what is your impression of Dr. Rochester? You've known him longer than I have. Would you say that he is quite normal?"

She stared thoughtfully across the room for several seconds, then said, "He's a very good doctor, Dr. Pitman, very dedicated. Of course, we know he's a very religious man, and that makes him a bit different from the rest of the people around here."

"Heaven knows I'm no atheist myself, Mrs. Rogers, but this isn't

religion; the man's positively weird. I call him in and show him the body of the president of the medical staff. We both saw him alive last night and apparently in good health. He suddenly appears on my postmortem table without any explanation, and all Dr. Rochester can say is examine the body and find out what he died of. If this is religion, he must be in some strange state of ecstasy."

"I agree with you it's all very irregular," she said. "Would you like me to call Mrs. Marlowe, or will you do it?"

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "No, you call her, Mrs. Rogers. I'm going to talk to the police."

"I'll speak to her from my office, poor woman," she said, and left.

He went out and called to Miss Plumbly who was still stationed at the outer door. "Would you get back to your desk and call the police for me. That's at least something you can do."

Inspector Richard McCallister came over with remarkable speed. As he told Dr. Pitman, when a reputable pathologist claims that he has a dead body that he can't explain, a good policeman doesn't waste time asking questions; he comes, but fast. The inspector was

a lean man whose features reflected a fleeting smile every time he spoke. The voice that emanated from his thin lips was surprisingly strong.

Sam Pitman felt reassured for the first time that morning; he wished he had called the police earlier instead of consulting with that visionary way-out colleague of his. Relaxed now, he gave a steady, systematic account of everything that had happened that morning, including the unaccountable reaction of the staff vice-president, Dr. Vaughan Rochester.

Inspector McCallister smiled when he heard the name. "Yes, I know Dr. Rochester well. We belong to the same church. I would say that he is a little more devout than I am; in fact, he's one of the deacons. He has an obsession about the Seven Deadly Sins. Whenever he gets to read the lesson, which is quite often, he recites them at both ends. Any member of our church could give you the list in his sleep: Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony and . . ."

Dr. Pitman interrupted him, playfully running a hand over his own prominent corporation. "Gluttony, that's me, and I only eat enough to keep a bird alive, but when I tell Vaughan that, he looks sour and says I must be referring

to a three hundred pound ostrich."

"Then there's Envy and finally Sloth."

The pathologist grinned, pointing to the outer office. "There sits Sloth out there, but she's coming to her reward now that Bob Marlowe has gone."

"What sort of man was Dr. Marlowe?"

"I didn't have too much to do with him outside the official business of the hospital. He wasn't my type, rather shallow, a social climber; had a reputation as a ladies' man. Still, it was a good year under his presidency; he was in especially good form last night. Boy, it's going to be rough next year under Vaughan Rochester. What am I saying, next year? Next year's here. With Bob Marlowe gone like this, Vaughan Rochester is already president. From now on there are going to be no more medical or social gatherings, just prayer meetings."

"I'd like to see the body if I may."

Dr. Pitman's features became set again as he led the way through the connecting door. The inspector walked slowly around the cheerless autopsy room, looked over the clothes on the chair without touching them, then came back to the table. He peeled the sheet off completely, taking care not to disturb

anything beneath, and stared down at the corpse, examining it from all angles.

"Has anybody touched anything here?"

"Not since I arrived."

"That's good. I can't see any signs of violence, at least not on the front of the body, can you, Doctor?"

"No."

Inspector McCallister replaced the sheet and pointed to a door about six feet from the foot of the table. "Where does that lead?"

"To a raised ramp on the parking lot. The bodies are taken out that way after we have finished with them and loaded into a hearse or ambulance. They are brought in here from the wards on a trolley through there." He pointed to a third door on the adjacent wall.

"So that if Dr. Marlowe's body did not come into this room by the orthodox route, it could have been brought in directly from the outside?"

"Yes."

"And there are not too many people around at night. It could have been brought in unnoticed that way." The inspector opened the door and walked out onto the short ramp. He tried the handle on the outside; it did not turn. "I see you need a key to unlock it from out here. Do you have

one, Doctor?" McCallister asked.

"Yes."

"Who else?"

"The janitorial staff have one. There's one at the switchboard." A startled look appeared on Dr. Pitman's face. "Bob Marlowe had one himself. The staff president always has a set of master keys. He could have let himself in and . . . Oh, no, that's ridiculous."

"There's one thing that is not ridiculous," said the inspector. "If Dr. Marlowe had been murdered, whoever had the body would also have the keys, and would naturally assume that they belong to his home or his office."

The phone rang in Dr. Pitman's office; he went in to answer it, then said, "Mrs. Marlowe has arrived, Inspector. We have a special room for interviewing relatives. Would you like to see her in there?"

"Say that I'll be over in a minute. Now, Doctor, we both agree that there is something radically wrong here, and I'm going to make a full, formal investigation. That means that nothing must be touched until my men have been over here, taken photographs, checked for fingerprints, and so on. I'll have to regard this room as the *locus delicti* and start here. Please see that nobody is allowed to come in till my men have ar-

rived. May I use your telephone?"

"Take my chair," said the pathologist. "Dial 9 if you want outside."

After Inspector McCallister had phoned through his instructions he said, "I'll see Mrs. Marlowe now. Perhaps your secretary will show me where to find her. I'd like you to stay here and keep guard over the autopsy room. My men should be here in a few minutes."

Miss Plumbley seemed glad of any excuse to put as much distance as possible between herself and the pathology department. She chatted amiably to the inspector all the way to the visitors' room, and it took all his firmness to persuade her to accept her dismissal and to understand that he wanted to go in alone.

Lucille Marlowe rose from the sofa as he came in. Mrs. Rogers, who had been keeping her company, excused herself and left. Mrs. Marlowe was a trim woman in her middle forties, of medium height and tastefully dressed, not beautiful but of pleasant overall appearance. Her expression was serious, but there were no signs of tears, shock or deep sorrow.

"I'm Inspector McCallister," he said.

She held out her hand. "How do you do, Inspector." Her voice was remarkably firm; he wondered

for a moment if she knew what had actually happened.

"Did you have a chance to talk with Mrs. Rogers?" he asked.

"Yes, she's a very kind person."

"She told you about your husband?"

"About his body being found here, yes."

"Doesn't this come as a surprise to you?"

"Naturally." Her voice was still devoid of emotion.

McCallister's wonder increased. "You appreciate that nobody knows how your husband's body got here. There is a possibility of foul play. That's why the police . . . Why I have been called in."

"I gathered that was the reason."

"You seem to be taking all this with remarkable calm, Mrs. Marlowe."

"I'm not the screaming, hysterical type."

"Were you expecting anything to happen to your husband?"

"No."

"When the body was first discovered in the morgue, Dr. Pitman naturally assumed that he had been taken ill in the night and been brought into the hospital as a patient. Do you know if he was ill?"

"He appeared quite well when I saw him last."

"When was that?"

"After dinner last night, about 7:30. He left for the staff meeting at the hospital."

"So he never came home after the meeting?"

"No."

"Weren't you worried?"

"I assumed that he had been caught up with some medical emergency and he had to stay with it."

"Did he often have emergencies like that?"

"No."

"Wouldn't he have called home or sent a message to say that he had been held up, just to let you know that he was safe?"

"He might have."

"But he didn't, and you made no effort to find out what had happened to him. You might, for example, have called the hospital."

She stood in front of him, rigid and a little paler, biting her lips.

He continued very softly. "You'll pardon me for being frank, Mrs. Marlowe, but I find your attitude a little strange. I have to ask you, would you say that your relations with your husband were satisfactory?"

"They could have been better."

"I see. You weren't in the process of divorce?"

"We hadn't come to that."

"The situation wasn't hopeless then?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Inspector. I would have found out in time."

"Are you interested in learning the cause of your husband's death?"

"Of course, I would like to know."

"The suggestion has been made that since your husband's body is here, Dr. Pitman be permitted to perform the postmortem examination. If you are willing to consent to this, I am prepared to authorize it."

"I have met Dr. Pitman once or twice socially, and I hear he's a good pathologist. I'm willing to let him do it."

"I'll pass that on." He held out his hand. "Do you have transportation home?"

"I have my car outside."

"I'll get in touch with you as soon as I have some concrete information."

He left the room hurriedly with the sensation of having just emerged from an icebox. When he got back to the pathology department his men were already at work. Most of the photographs had already been taken, and one man was delicately dropping the dead man's clothes, garment by garment, into individual cellophane bags. The fingerprint men were busily dusting the tiles on the au-

topsy table and searching diligently for likely prints. The presence of the investigating team had produced a minor frenzy in the laboratory. Every few seconds one of the technicians would gravitate surreptitiously to the glass partition and peer through the open door of the autopsy room trying to glean details of what was going on.

The inspector sat down with Dr. Pitman until his men should finish.

"Well," asked the pathologist, "what did Lucille Marlowe have to say?"

"She was no more helpful than anyone else so far, but she did give her consent for you to perform the autopsy."

"Why me? Surely you didn't take that part seriously."

"Why not? What better place? The body's all laid out for you, ready."

"But . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Doctor, perhaps I was a bit hasty. You're not squeamish, I hope."

"No, it's not that. I've done postmortems before on people I've known. Once the soul has left the body, so to speak, it's all the same to me."

"Then what's holding you back?"

"Well, this is a little unorthodox, isn't it? I mean this sort of case

usually goes to the coroner's pathologist."

"Firstly, let me say, Doctor, that I haven't got where I am today by consistently following orthodox methods. Secondly, aren't you taking it for granted that this man has been the victim of foul play? Look, the body is undisturbed in your morgue; you're an experienced pathologist; go ahead; take the bull by the horns."

For a moment there was an expression of doubt on Dr. Pitman's face; then his customary broad grin came back, forming deep creases on his cheeks. "Put that way, Inspector, it's a challenge I can't refuse. However, there is one thing. Supposing I don't find any obvious cause of death, like a knife wound in the back—if you'll pardon the expression—the problem of poison or some other subtle cause arises. My laboratory is only set up for routine medical pathology; I don't have the facilities for complete forensic analysis."

"Let me have specimens of the organs, and my chemists will be only too happy to oblige you."

"Right, then it's a deal." The pathologist stretched out a hand across the desk; but before Inspector McCallister could grasp it, the commanding sound of shattered glass reached them even through the thickness of the window. Dr.

Pitman straightened. "What now?"

McCallister turned quickly to see one of the women technicians lying prone on the floor, the fragments of a chemical flask strewn around her. For a second Dr. Pitman was at his side; then he made a dash for the outer office and ran into the laboratory. The inspector followed close behind him.

By the time they reached the scene the young woman was staggering to her feet, being assisted by two of her fellow technicians. Bits of glass were falling from her clothing, tinkling on the floor. One of them must have cut her chin from which blood was oozing.

"What happened?" asked Dr. Pitman.

"She fainted," said one of the young men. "I saw her go pale, then whoops, down she went, flask and all. I was standing on the other side of the bench, otherwise I would have tried to catch her."

"Did you hurt yourself, Pat?" Dr. Pitman brushed the blood from her chin with his forefinger. "Hm, only a surface wound."

Still dazed, Pat shook her head. "No, I'm all right."

She was a striking looking girl, with dark hair and eyes that stood out vividly against the temporary pallor of her skin. Inspector McCallister noted how well the white

technician's coat hung on her slender figure.

Dr. Pitman was feeling her pulse. "It's a bit rapid," he said. "I think you ought to go down to emergency and let the man in charge check you over. Why don't you fellows help her down there?"

The color was coming back to her cheeks now, giving them a ra-



diant glow. The wound on her chin began to bleed more briskly and a dark red drop fell onto her white lapel, but she seemed unaware of it for she shook her head again. "No, really, I'll be all right."

The doctor took her gently by the shoulders and started her off toward the door. She continued on her way, supported by a colleague

on either side. He watched them go.

Dr. Pitman muttered all the way back to his office, then stood behind his desk frowning.

"What's bothering you, Doctor?"

"I don't know. The whole family seems to be acting strangely today."

"What family?"

"That was Patricia Newark; she's Dr. Rochester's niece. You might ask me how an old sourpuss like that could have such a beautiful niece. I don't know the answer to that one, but they're acting strangely. I wonder what came over her."

Inspector McCallister offered no comment. The last of his men were leaving the autopsy room. He looked at his watch. "I have to get back to my other work. It looks as if the coast is clear for you to begin now. Good luck, Doctor. Give me a call if you find anything interesting."

"Yes," said the pathologist absently. He pulled off his coat and hung a rubber apron over his paunch.

As the inspector left he saw that Miss Plumbley's office was deserted. Perhaps she was out on her coffee break. It did occur to him that she might have left for good, she had looked so scared each time he had seen her out there.

As he got into his car he had a

glimpse of Dr. Rochester just driving off in his big black sedan. He nearly caught up with him along the street but was parted from him by a traffic light. The signal turned green, and a couple of blocks farther down he saw the black sedan parked outside Mary Anne's Cleaning Establishment. The well built doctor was crossing the sidewalk holding up a dark blue suit on a hanger. Inspector McCallister drove on.

He was glued to his desk for the next two hours, then a preliminary report came to him from his laboratory. He studied it thoughtfully for several minutes, reading it and rereading it, then picked up the phone. "Is Jarvis there?" He waited for Jarvis to come to the phone. "Go over to Mary Anne's Cleaning Establishment on Park Street immediately, and pick up a dark blue suit left there by a Dr. Vaughan Rochester this morning. Hurry; I hope they haven't got to work on it yet."

His secretary came in. "It's getting late, Inspector. Would you like a lunch tray sent up?"

"No thanks, Molly, I'm going over to the Bishops Community Hospital. I'll pick up something in the cafeteria there." He ran down to his car.

When McCallister walked into the autopsy room, Sam Pitman

was just completing his examination. He pointed to a row of wide necked bottles all neatly labeled. "There are the specimens all ready to go. Will you have one of your men pick them up, or shall I have them sent?"

"I'll get someone to pick them up. I gather that you haven't found any obvious cause of death."

The pathologist pursed his lips. "Well, yes and no."

"Could you be a little more explicit, Doctor? What's the yes, for example?"

"Well, Dr. Marlowe seems to have had a coronary attack."

"Surely he either did or did not."

"Unfortunately, it's not as simple as all that."

"Tell me, what did you find?"

"He had a fresh blood clot in the left coronary artery of his heart."

"What would cause that?"

"Coronary artery disease; hardening and narrowing of the vessels."

"Did he have that?"

"Oh yes, and the heart was enlarged. He must have had a raised blood pressure for some time."

"Wasn't he being treated for this?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Wouldn't that be rather unusual for a doctor?"

"On the contrary, doctors are among the worst offenders in this respect. Bob Marlowe may even have been trying to treat himself. We make all sorts of jokes about this kind of thing, you know; a doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient and a bigger fool for a doctor, and so on, but we all do it. Come to think of it, I haven't had a physical myself for years."

"Hm, let's come back to Dr. Marlowe. You say his coronary arteries were diseased and he had a fresh blood clot in one of them, but you're still not sure this is what killed him. I don't want to appear naive, but I fail to see your problem."

"It's the strange circumstances of the whole case, Inspector. You see, if Dr. Marlowe had died as a patient in this hospital, or even if he had suddenly dropped dead in the street and been brought in here, and if I had found what I found just now, I wouldn't be looking any further for the cause of death. But things being what they are, my index of suspicion is raised very high."

Inspector McCallister smiled. "Why don't you leave the suspecting to me, Doctor? I understand that this is what is known as coronary thrombosis. Are you trying to tell me that Dr. Marlowe could

have survived this, or are you suggesting that it could have been brought about by some human agency?"

"He could certainly have survived. A large number of people do."

"Then why do people die at all from coronary thrombosis?"

"In this sort of case, it's from what we call ventricular fibrillation. To put it simply, in certain cases, the ventricles of the heart suddenly go into spasm and stop pumping. That's the end, of course."

"Why does it occur in some cases of coronary thrombosis and not in others?"

"Nobody knows really, some sensitivity of the heart muscle, some temporary inhibition. For example, this may occur while the patient is under medical care, say in the hospital. If you have the proper apparatus ready and use it within about five minutes, you can sometimes start the heart up again, and the patient will recover."

"Very interesting, but you're not sure if that's what happened here, this fibrillation?"

"There's no way of telling. Frankly, I don't know what to think. I just can't believe that Bob Marlowe had a heart attack last night, let himself into this room, took off all his clothes, folded them

up neatly and laid them on that chair, climbed up onto the slab, draped himself with the sheet, then went into fibrillation and died. Do you believe that?"

The inspector's smile took on an impish quality. "If it helps with your hypothesis, you might be interested to know that Dr. Marlowe's car was found on the hospital parking lot."

"I don't have a hypothesis." The pathologist ran his finger along the row of labeled bottles. "I want your lab to do every conceivable test on these organs. If they come up with nothing, I'll have to accept the coronary thrombosis as the cause of death. After that, we can start working on a hypothesis, at least, you can."

"Fair enough. By the way, how's that beautiful technician of yours, Miss Newark?"

"Oh, she'll be all right. It was just a fainting spell and a little cut on the chin. Something must be upsetting her; I don't know what it is. Still, we sent her home for the rest of the day."

"I'm glad it was nothing serious. I'll send someone over for those jars." The inspector went out.

Before going to the cafeteria he stopped in at the personnel office. A bright, chirrupy young woman looked up at him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I had a message to deliver to Miss Newark, Patricia Newark. They tell me she had to leave early. Would you be kind enough to give me her address?"

"One moment, sir." The girl opened a metal filing cabinet beside her desk, riffled through it, then scribbled the address on a piece of paper; it was in an apartment house a few blocks away from the hospital.

He thanked her and continued on to the cafeteria where he joined a couple of his patrol officers. They had just brought in some victims of a street accident and were passing the time over a cup of coffee while they awaited the doctor's report.

Inspector McCallister was through in about fifteen minutes, then he drove down to the apartment house. Miss Newark looked startled when she opened the door to him. Her beautiful features were drawn and there were unmistakable signs of weeping. She wore a small patch on her chin.

"Do you remember me?" he asked. "I was with Dr. Pitman this morning when you passed out in the laboratory."

"You're from the police."

"Yes. May I come in?"

She stepped back to let him pass, closing the door behind him. He was standing in a fair sized

livingroom furnished in a rather stark style which scarcely appealed to him, but he tried to be complimentary. "It's delightfully simple and modern in here." He looked down. "And I must say I admire your carpet."

She forced a smile. "That's the most luxurious thing I have in here. I like to lie on it when the chairs get too hard."

"May I offer you a cigarette?"

"No, I don't smoke, but you may if you want to."

He lit one for himself. "May I sit down?"

"Please, do."

He took one of the high-backed armchairs while she poised herself uncomfortably on the edge of an ordinary chair.

"How long have you worked at the Bishops Community Hospital, Miss Newark?"

"About two years now."

"You like it there?"

"I love it."

"You enjoy being a lab technician?"

"It's very exciting work."

There was an uneasy look on her face, and every word she uttered was guarded. He stared at her for a moment, then seemed to fall into deep thought, drawing hard on his cigarette. He pulled it slowly from his mouth and let his hand fall on the arm of the chair. A roll of

ash dropped onto the carpet, and he suddenly came to life. "Oh, pardon me, I've soiled your beautiful carpet."

"It doesn't matter," she said flatly. "It's not the first time it's had ash spilled on it. I'll clean it later."

"I won't hear of it." He snatched some tissues from his pocket, dropped to his knees, and began brushing vigorously at the ash, sweeping it into one of the tissues.

She held out her hand. "Thank you very much. I'll put it in the garbage."

"Please don't bother." He thrust the tissues back into his pocket and pulled an ashtray toward him. "I'll take care to use this next time. Now, you're probably wondering why I came here."

"I assumed it wasn't a purely social visit."

"Of course not. It's about this unfortunate affair of Dr. Marlowe."

"Why do you come to me?"

"I was hoping you might have some information you could give me which would throw some light on the mystery."

"Why me?"

"The thought occurred to me when you passed out this morning when all that commotion was going on over the body."

"That had nothing to do with it."

"Nothing at all?"

"Well, I suppose I was upset. After all, we all knew Dr. Marlowe very well, him being staff president, too. But I have my own personal problems."

"You wouldn't want to tell me about them?"

She shook her head, staring at him sullenly. He stood up. "You're sure there's no information you can give me about Dr. Marlowe?"

"No." Her lips fastened together.

"I'm disappointed."

She let him out without a goodbye. He drove back to the station.

The report which he particularly wanted did not reach his desk until the middle of the next morning; his men had carefully double checked everything. After he had read it he asked his secretary to call Dr. Rochester.

"What is it?" asked the stern voice.

"I'd like to come over and talk to you, Doctor."

"About this business of Robert Marlowe?"

"That's right."

"I've got a very busy schedule today. How much time do you want?"

"Fifteen to twenty minutes should do it."

"Let me look at my appointment book." There was a pause. "You'll have to wait till 2:30 this afternoon."

"I'll be there," McCallister stated.

Dr. Rochester saw him at precisely 2:30. "What did you want to tell me, Inspector?"

"I'd like to start off with a question. What was the particular sin that Dr. Marlowe committed?"

"I'm quite sure you didn't come here to discuss theological matters."

"It may well turn out to be a theological problem, Doctor. Would I be correct in saying that the sin in question would be Lust?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I interviewed Mrs. Lucille Marlowe at the hospital yesterday, and I was greatly impressed by two things; first, her remarkable composure for a woman who has suddenly become a widow, and second, I discovered that her husband had never returned home after the staff meeting the previous night and that she had done nothing to ascertain his whereabouts. She was not aware that anything had happened to him till Mrs. Rogers called her from the hospital. When I questioned her about her lack of curiosity she gave me the rather unconvincing explanation that she assumed that her husband had been detained by some medical emergency. If such a thing had happened to you, Doctor, wouldn't you have notified your wife so that

she wouldn't be unduly alarmed?"

"I probably would."

"Of course you would. No, the fact of the matter is that Mrs. Marlowe was used to her husband staying away all night, but not for professional reasons. He was, as Dr. Pitman put it, a bit of a ladies' man."

"I regret to say that this is quite true. My late colleague was an exceedingly immoral person. But why do you come to me with all this stuff?"

"Because, unfortunately, Dr. Rochester, it concerns you personally. One of the ladies in question was your niece, Miss Patricia Newark. In fact, after that staff meeting, instead of going home, Dr. Marlowe went straight to Miss Newark's apartment."

Dr. Rochester's deep set eyes fixed themselves on the inspector menacingly. "You are making a very serious allegation, you know. I trust you are in a position to prove it."

The smile that flickered over McCallister's face only served to intensify his expression. "Let's stop playing, Dr. Rochester. Allow me to reconstruct for you what actually happened. While he was at Miss Newark's apartment, Dr. Marlowe had the misfortune—her misfortune—to suffer a fatal heart attack. Your niece very wisely

called you and asked for your help. You went over, removed the body, transported it in Dr. Marlowe's own car to the hospital morgue, stripped it, folded the clothes, and then left the corpse ready for your colleague, Dr. Pitman."

"You really believe this fantastic story, Inspector?"

"It's a strange thing that lying is not included among the deadly sins, Doctor, but I'm sure you don't enjoy it, nevertheless. To save you further embarrassment, let me tell you that I have incontrovertible evidence for every statement I have made. The first pointer came when my men examined the dead man's suit. It was of a light gray color, rather gay, the sort of color Dr. Marlowe might have been expected to wear. Careful examination of the front of the suit showed the presence of some dark blue fibers from the suit of another man who, for example, might have thrown the body over his shoulder to carry it out. I happened to remember that I had seen you taking a dark blue suit into the cleaners that morning, and I took the liberty of requisitioning your suit from them for examination. The fibers matched unmistakably; there were also some gray fibers on the right shoulder of your suit."

"I see," growled Dr. Rochester, "and where does my niece come

into all your ingenious sleuthing?"

"On both suits there were some other fibers, short, broken pieces of nylon of different colors; my experts told me those must have come from a certain type of carpet. They were most profuse on the back of the gray suit, where the corpse had presumably lain, and on the knees of the blue suit. I assume that you had knelt down beside the body, perhaps to attempt resuscitation, or maybe merely to enable you to pick it up; I can only guess there, of course. We found some similar fibers in Dr. Marlowe's car which you left on the parking lot.

"Yesterday afternoon I paid a brief visit to Miss Newark in her apartment and was able to obtain a sample of fibers from her carpet. Once again, they matched unmissably. Need I say more?"

The broad shoulders sagged for the first time. "It's my punishment for the sin of Pride. I told myself I was doing it to protect my niece's reputation, but it was my own reputation I was thinking of as a professional man, vice-president of the medical staff, a deacon of the church; I couldn't tolerate a scandal in the family."

"I know exactly what happened, and I can understand your motives in removing the body," said the inspector, "but tell me, what pos-

sessed you to put on this bizarre production, carrying the corpse over to the hospital and laying it out on the autopsy table? Why didn't you drive the car down the street and leave the body behind the wheel? It would have been found, taken over to the city morgue, an autopsy would have been performed, and everybody would have assumed that the heart attack had occurred where he was found. No one would ever have connected it with your niece."

The doctor nodded grimly. "That's what I intended to do originally, but when I got the body out to the car I realized what a serious mistake I was making. Doing it that way I was conniving with my niece, even condoning her misconduct. I didn't want her to get that impression. I think that we are too permissive today with our young people and their loose-living morality. I wanted her to be punished, so I took the body over to the hospital, laid it out in the autopsy room, and did my best to get the postmortem performed right there. I knew that she would have to come to work that morning within a few feet of her lover's body. I hoped that would teach her a lesson she'd never forget."

"I'm sure she will never forget it," the inspector said, with feeling.

The usual hard look had gone

out of Dr. Rochester's eyes. "I know you've come to arrest me. Can I ask you a small favor? Could you wait until this evening when I've seen all my patients? They all have appointments, and they are expecting me to attend to them. I'm sure you know I won't run away."

"You misunderstand me. I have no intention of arresting you."

The hard look returned. "Look, Inspector, because we both belong to the same church, I expect no special privileges or favors. You have your duty to perform as a police officer."

McCallister regarded him solemnly. "It's not a question of special privileges, Doctor. It's just that I'd be hard put to it to find a charge against you. You found the body of a man who had died of

natural causes and transported it to the autopsy room of the hospital. This happens many times every day in slightly less dramatic circumstances. Oh, I suppose I could pull something out of the book, but it would have to be something highly technical and rare, hardly sufficient to warrant the scandal that would envelop you, your niece, poor Mrs. Marlowe, the hospital, everybody. No, I told you when I came in that it might turn out to be a purely theological matter. If you will permit me to quote from the book of Corinthians, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, sayeth the Lord.'

"I propose to leave you in His hands." Inspector McCallister rose. "I'll see that your suit is returned to you, Dr. Rochester, duly cleansed."



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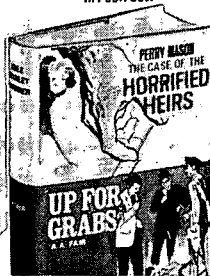
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